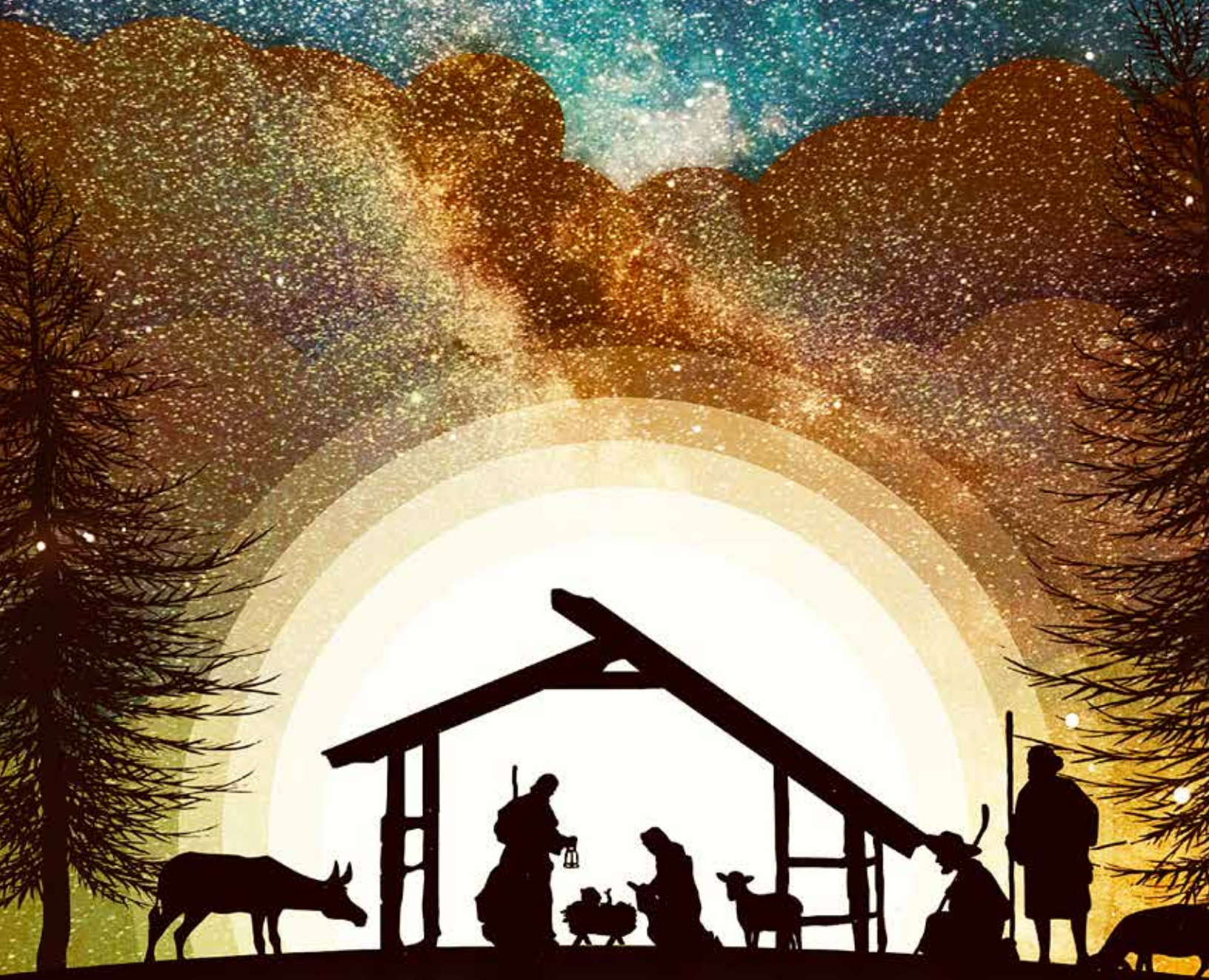


Journeys



JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | Winter 2023-2024 | Vol. 3.2



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JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | WINTER 2023-2024 | VOL. 3.2

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About the Quarter

With all the swift transition in the world around us, it is easy to forfeit our fortitude in modeling a consistent Christian witness. Sometimes, we feel it is just enough to get through the day unscathed. The lessons in this quarter invite us to be active change agents, intentionally showing up and witnessing God's love, justice, and peace to a broken world in need of healing. One candle gives forth great light in darkness; a community of believers united in the Spirit can be a collective beacon brighter than any darkness that seeks to mute our message or harm humanity. As we embark upon a new year, Advent beckons us to be the light heralding the coming of God's Kingdom. The world needs us to be who we say we are. The world needs to see Christ. And if we dare lift him up, he will do the rest. We are many, and we are one. We have each other, and God has us all. *"Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us"* (Matthew 1:23, KJV).

About the Writers

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COMMUNITY

already, but not yet!

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

—1 CORINTHIANS 1:8

Introduction

In today's brief text, the Apostle Paul sets the stage for an extended discussion of what a kingdom community looks like. Shining a light on the promise of the day of the Lord, when Christ will return, Paul emphasizes God's faithfulness and initiative in our lives. Individualism is ruled out and our mutual interdependence is emphasized throughout the Corinthian correspondence. Whatever giftedness we may have is the result of God's work in our lives. First Corinthians was first written and read as a pastoral letter written to provide guidance to a church being torn apart by tribalism. For that reason, today's text speaks powerfully to us in our divided society this Advent season.

Lesson Objectives

- To read today's text as part of an ongoing conversation between the Apostle Paul and the church in Corinth.
- To reflect with Paul and the Corinthians on God's faithfulness as we look towards the future.
- To gain a deeper appreciation of the many ways in which we are connected to other Christians around the world and over the centuries.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 NRSV

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5 for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— 6 just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8 He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Into the Scripture

First Corinthians contains sixteen chapters and is part of Paul's extensive correspondence with the church in Corinth. While the New Testament contains two of Paul's letters to the Corinthian church, scholars believe that he wrote to them on at least four separate occasions. The first letter is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9 indicating that 1 Corinthians is the Apostle's second letter to the Corinthians. While scholars have speculated on the (possibly) composite nature of 1 Corinthians, since the second century CE, 1 Corinthians was known only in the form in which we have it today.¹

Today's text is the epistle reading for the first Sunday in Advent (Year B). Although the lectionary reading begins at verse 3, verses 1-3 form a single unit—the salutation. Verses 7-8 of today's text refer to the revealing of Jesus Christ and to the day of the Lord, what Christians throughout the centuries have called the Second Coming of Christ.

Located on the Isthmus of Corinth in the Roman province of Achaia in Greece, Corinth was a maritime city with two harbors in the first century CE. Acts 18:1-17 relates how Paul, working together with Priscilla and Aquila, founded the church in Corinth around 50–52 CE during his second missionary journey. Scholarly consensus holds that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians during his

third missionary journey while staying in Ephesus probably sometime in 54–57 CE—possibly in response to questions he had received from the church.²

Reading a letter is like listening to one end of a phone conversation. Based on what we hear on our end, we try to make an

educated guess concerning what the person on the other end might be saying. Archaeologists have discovered a large and diverse collection of papyrus letters written in koine Greek and preserved in the sands of Egypt from the first century CE. These letters were written by people on all levels of society and social status, and they all begin with a salutation in which the sender and addressee are identified and words of greeting and well wishes are expressed.



God has called the church to be a holy community.

Here are two examples from first-century letters:

- “Hippolitos to his dearest Akousilaos many greetings.”
- “Theon to his brother Herakleides many greetings and good health.”³

The Apostle Paul followed this convention with his salutations but gave it a distinctly Christian flavor. He identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ called to that role by God. He also named “our brother Sosthenes” as one who joined him in the production of this letter. This Sosthenes may be the one who appears in an incident in Corinth described in Acts 18:12-17 and would have been well-known to Paul's readers.

The recipients are characterized in verse 2 by the fact of God's initiative with them. Paul reminds them that God has called the church to be a holy community (“called to be saints”). Paul concludes this part of his letter in verse 3 with a distinctly Christian greeting: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Once again, Paul was pointing the Corinthians towards the God who had called them together and given them every good gift.

Verses 4-9 of our text constitute what is called the thanksgiving section of a Hellenistic letter. An example dating from the second century CE from a young soldier to his worried mother reads, “Theonas to his mother and lady, Tetheus, very many greetings. . . . Do not worry yourself about me. . . . I give thanks to (the gods) . . . continually . . .”⁴ Paul adapts the thanksgiving section



to frame the discussion that is about to be developed in the body of his letter, emphasizing God's faithfulness, a call to Christian unity, and hope for Christ's return. He begins, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus" (verse 4). Paul reminded the Corinthians that as God's holy ones, they awaited the coming Day of the Lord (see verses 7-8), and they must live accordingly.

Into the Lesson

In 1 Corinthians, Paul was writing a pastoral letter to a troubled church. The members of the Corinthian church conflicted with one another. They were pulling in many different directions, threatening both the unity of the congregation within and its witness to the world outside. In verses 1-9, Paul framed the discussion in such a way that he could engage the Corinthians in an extensive dialogue on how life in Christ's messianic community should look. In verse 2, Paul wrote, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." Two important points are made here. First, the Corinthians had a calling to be saints, people set aside for God's purposes in the world ("called to be saints"). Second, they were part of a larger movement, the church at-large ("all those who in every place . . ."). In later times, the word *saint* referred to people who were out of the ordinary and were pictured with haloes in Christian art.

However, in our text, Paul is drawing from Old Testament teaching—where God's people are called as a community to bear witness to God's goodness in the

world. In Exodus 19:5-6a, God instructed Moses to throw out this challenge to the people: "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

Emphasizing God's faithful initiative, Paul reminded his readers that they had been adequately equipped by God to be the church. He reminded them that it is by God's grace that they were gifted (verse 4). We learn later in 1 Corinthians that some members had become proud of their superior knowledge (see 4:6-7). But in verse 7, Paul reminded them that any knowledge they possessed ("in speech and knowledge of every kind," verse 5) was given them by God.

In the verses immediately following today's passage, he wrote, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters" (1 Corinthians 1:10-11, NRSVUE). In 1 Corinthians, Paul not only strove to make his own presence felt, but he also worked to reel in the contentious Corinthians, seeking to reconnect them to the central



God's people are called as a community to bear witness to God's goodness in the world.

Christian story (see 1 Corinthians 11; 1 Corinthians 15). His explanation of the meaning of the Lord's Supper begins, "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you . . ." (11:23). The apostle needed to reestablish his authority and make his presence felt from a distance. How could he do that in an age before rapid communications? Sending a representative and writing a letter were two means that he used.

Each year, we celebrate Advent as the beginning of the church year. Often our focus is on preparation for the celebration of the wondrous story of Christmas. Advent also invites us to look forward in hope to what the church has called the Second Coming (or Second Advent) of Christ. However, the hope for the Second Coming of Christ is not an invitation to speculate on the *when* or the *how*. It is a call to anchor our hope in the *who* and the *why*.

In today's text, Paul pointed the Corinthians towards our Christian hope for the answer to our prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In the Christian story, history is moving towards a goal. He reminded the Corinthians that their giftedness was preparation for the coming of God's kingdom (" . . . as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ," verse 7). They had been strengthened for the coming Day of the Lord (verse 8). The word translated "revealing" in verse 7 is the Greek word from which we get "apocalypse."

In the time between Easter and Christ's return, we live in the time of "already but not yet." We are called to live here and now as people who belong to the coming Kingdom of God, the Messianic Kingdom. We are called to be witnesses to the power of Christ's Cross and Resurrection. In verse 6, Paul writes, "Just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you." The Greek word translated "testimony" here is the one from which our English word *martyr* is derived. The root meaning of "martyr" is not one who dies for the faith but, rather, one who bears witness to its truth by living it day by day. And this is what the Corinthians were forgetting.

Paul concludes the thanksgiving section of this letter with the ringing affirmation that, come what may, God has been and will be faithful: "God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:9).

Into Discipleship

A "No Shush" Welcome

We recently attended a Philadelphia Orchestra concert. The parking garage was so full that we had to park on the uppermost level. Speaking with people in the elevator on the way down, we learned that a number of performances were taking place at the same time on the Avenue of the Arts. After the orchestra performance, we made our way back to the garage and rode the packed elevator upwards. By the ninth floor, it was only another family and we who remained—a father, a mother, and a young man with Down Syndrome. Noticing that they had a program from the ballet, I asked about the performance they had attended. The father explained that it was especially meant for people with special needs. He said it was a "No Shush" performance. We asked their son how he enjoyed the performance of *Swan Lake*. His face lit up with a big smile and he told us that it was terrific!

That was a performance with an extra measure of tolerance baked into the experience. At one time or another, most of us need to be treated to an extra measure of patience and tolerance. I know that I have benefitted from "No Shush" tolerance at times. Unlike the contentious Corinthians, our churches need to be "No Shush" places of welcome.

Letters: Presence in Absence

During our courtship, my wife and I were separated for several months. We wrote letters—love letters. I have a love letter from my mother to my father shortly after



We are called to live as
people who belong to the
coming Kingdom of God.



they became engaged. And I have a letter I wrote to my wife's parents the year after we were married. In our age of email, text, and social media, perhaps there is still a place for letters.

Today's text is part of a letter—not a theological treatise—from the Apostle Paul, miles away, to the church in Corinth. How do we make our presence felt in absence? Paul reminded the Corinthians of the promise of the Day of the Lord, the revelation of Jesus Christ, that we await. He reminded them of their hope for a time when the Christ will be fully present in our midst. In the meantime, we are called to be living letters from God to the world.

In 2 Corinthians 3:2-4, Paul wrote, “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God” (RSV). We are indeed called to be living letters from God to the world around us!

No Self-made Christians

We sometimes read or hear of wealthy, successful people who are described as “self-made.” Digging a little deeper into their stories often uncovers help of some kind that the self-made person received along the way. This is not to discount the hard work and initiative that got them

to where they are. But in today's text, Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were *not self-made Christians*. “. . . For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind,” he wrote (1:5).

Who's Running in the Lane Next to Me?

Recently, I was contacted by a high school classmate on one of those forums that groups people by school and by year. I remembered her name but not her face, so I got out the yearbook from my senior year. While I was perusing it, I found a picture of myself running a relay race at a high school track meet. In the lane next to me was the great Lynn Swann (of Pittsburgh Steelers fame). He was from a nearby Catholic high school. I marveled that I could be running in the same race! It was a relay race, however, and all I had to do was to receive the baton from the person before me, run my leg, and pass the baton to the next person on the team. No doubt Lynn Swann passed me on our leg of the race. But each of us was part of a team. It did not depend on any one of us. This is the way we are called to run our race as Christians—as one leg in God's great relay race!

Notes

1. Raymond Harrington Collins, *Sacra Pagina: First Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2006), 10-14.
2. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 428.
3. John L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 187-188.
4. White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, 158.

Closing Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we long for Christ's healing touch in our broken world. As we enter this season of Advent, call us beyond all tribalism and party spirit in our congregations and in our communities. We accept your call to be your saints, a people set aside to model the Jesus way for the world. Help us to live in eager hope for the arrival of your reign among us. May your kingdom come; may your will be done. Maranatha! Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Apostle Paul emphasizes that it is God who calls us to our place in the Christian community. What do we expect to hear about “call” from candidates for ordination? From candidates for baptism?
- We read 1 Corinthians as Scripture, but it was first written and read as a pastoral letter written to

provide guidance to a church being torn apart by tribalism. If Paul were to reach out to the Corinthians today, what are the modes of communication that would be available to him? Which do you suppose he would choose and why?

■ Into the Lesson

- Although the season of Advent serves as a time of preparation leading up to Christmas, it also invites us to look forward in hope to the Day of the Lord. The nature of this hope varies widely from one congregation to the next. What does your church teach about the Second Coming of Christ?
- The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that God had given them the gifts they needed to do and to be the church. What are the God-given gifts in evidence in your congregation? What gifts do you bring to your community of faith?

■ Into Discipleship

- Imagine that you are writing a letter to your ten-year-old self. What guidance for the life ahead would you provide? What would you share about the role that faith in Christ has played in your life over the years?
- How well does your church provide a welcoming “No Shush” environment for visitors (or the very young) who may not know the rules or for those who may be differently abled? Share with the class your own expectations about what makes for a worshipful atmosphere when the congregation gathers.



Resources

Songs to Consider

- “In Christ There Is No East or West” sung by Chris Brunelle: <https://youtu.be/GG8hzY1OoM4>
- “Soon and Very Soon,” sung by Andrae Crouch: <https://youtu.be/lmGiu9JfbIs>
- “Help Us Accept Each Other” by Fred Kaan (Can be sung to the tune of “The Church Is One Foundation”): https://youtu.be/7bqkTMO5fW8?si=Ffb87Tgm1WAm1E_N

Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us; teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace. Be present, Lord, among us and bring us to believe: we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live.

Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.

Teach us to care for people, for all—not just for some, to love them as we find them or as they may become.

Let your acceptance change us so that we may be moved in living situations to do the truth in love; to practice your acceptance until we know by heart the table of forgiveness and laughter’s healing art.

Lord, for today’s encounters with all who are in need, who hunger for acceptance, for justice and for bread, we need new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on; renew us with your Spirit; Lord, free us, make us one!

Media Options

- **The National Council of Churches’ “Christian Unity: *Theological Dialogue and Matters of Faith and Order*”** provides many short publications on issues related to the unity of the Christian Church. Choose one to discuss with your group over a meal or have individuals each choose one as a reading assignment, and have them report back to the group with a synopsis of the article at a future meeting. <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/christian-unity/>
- Visit the Burma Advocacy Group Facebook Page to learn about the oppressive regime in Myanmar and how Burma refugees in the United States need support: <https://www.facebook.com/burmaadvocacygroup>. If there is a congregation in your area of people from Burma, perhaps invite someone to

speak to your group and share about the current situation.

Baptist Connection

“Baptist Freedom Fighters: Who We Are”: The Baptist Joint Committee (BJC) supports peace and the liberty of all to worship freely. This concept includes key Baptist tenets. View and discuss this short video that encapsulates historical Baptist leaders and their advocacy to allow everyone to not be imposed upon religiously by their government. <https://bjconline.org/mission-history-baptist-heritage/>

Activity Idea

Those older than forty years of age: Write a letter to your eighteen-year-old self in which you share a story about someone who helped you with your faith journey in the intervening years. **Those younger than forty years of age:** Write a letter to your seventy-five-year-old self, sharing what kind of person you hope to be at that point in your life.

Devotional Scriptures Year B First Sunday of Advent Week of December 3, 2023

Sunday, December 3

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Monday, December 4

Psalm 79; Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 15:1-8

Tuesday, December 5

Psalm 79; Micah 4:6-13; Revelation 18:1-10

Wednesday, December 6

Psalm 79; Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 21:34-38

Thursday, December 7

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Hosea 6:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Friday, December 8

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 11:19-26

Saturday, December 9

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Mark 11:27-33

HOPE

good news from God

The grass withers, the flower fades, . . .
but the word of our God will stand forever.

—ISAIAH 40:7a, 8b

Introduction

Today's text in Second Isaiah contains a message of comfort and hope for God's people. God's faithfulness across the years is contrasted with our human inconstancy. The God of Israel was about to do a new thing. The original audience, living in exile, must have longed for the good old days. However, God promised through God's prophet that *good new days* lay ahead. The exiles must have struggled to find meaning in their situation. What sense could be made of their suffering and hardship? When the text says that Jerusalem had received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins, the close, one-to-one connection between sin and suffering is decoupled. Instead, God's love and faithfulness are emphasized.

Lesson Objectives

- To gain a deeper appreciation for the impact that the book of Isaiah has had in Christian life and practice.
- To consider the meaning of the Isaiah prophecies to the original audience.
- To reflect on the nature of biblical hope in a turbulent world.

Isaiah 40:1-11 NRSV

1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows

upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. 9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Into the Scripture

The book of Isaiah is the most frequently quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament (85 times from 61 separate passages). Christian interpretation has tended to read Isaiah through the lens of the story of Jesus. St. Jerome (c. 342-420) wrote that Isaiah “should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because [the prophet] describes all the mysteries of Christ and the church so clearly that you would think he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying about what is to come.”¹ In Jewish practice, the book of Isaiah is cited more than any other prophetic book in rabbinic sources. And more prophetic readings chanted

in synagogue services (*haftaroth*) are taken more from Isaiah than from any other prophetic book.²

Authorship was traditionally ascribed to Isaiah of Jerusalem, who prophesied during the eighth century BCE, when the Assyrian Empire was dominant

in the Middle East. As early as the twelfth century CE, however, Rabbi ibn Ezra expressed some doubt about the unity of the book of Isaiah. Scholars have noted that the language and apparent historical setting of the events of Isaiah 1–39 belong to the Assyrian period in the eighth century BCE. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylonian invaders, and many inhabitants of the land of Judah were carried into exile. Chapters 40–55 seem to come from a later period, when the Babylonian Empire was coming to an end and Persia was rising. Cyrus the Great, the Persian emperor who would allow the Jewish



The book of Isaiah is cited more than any other prophetic book.

exiles to return to their homeland, is mentioned hopefully three times in Isaiah (see 44:28; 45:1, 13).

In the twentieth century, a scholarly consensus formed around a three-part division of Isaiah—First Isaiah (chapters 1–39), Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), and Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66). However, as scholars have increasingly come to recognize the interwoven nature of the prophecies and poetry within the entire book of Isaiah, aspects of this three-part division have been questioned. Chapters 40 and 55 serve as bookends to the middle section of Isaiah, a section whose tone is one of hopefulness, where the universal nature of God’s redemptive work is stressed. In the face of the great national disaster of the Babylonian Exile, Isaiah 40 begins with these stirring words: “Comfort, O comfort my people.” The time of great national pain and humiliation was coming to an end.



While many of the earlier chapters of Isaiah speak of violence and destruction, our text begins with the words “Comfort, O comfort my people.” In verses 6a and 8, God’s abiding faithfulness is contrasted with the human tendency to fall away into unfaithfulness:

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field. . . .
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

In verses 10a and 11, God’s might and God’s tenderness are juxtaposed:

See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm
rules for him; . . .
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

The first two verses of our text summarize the overall message of Isaiah 40–55: an announcement of good news and an end to the long ordeal of exile. The verbs “speak,” “comfort,” and “declare” all appear in plural form. Similar to Isaiah 6, our text seems to be set in the heavenly council with multiple voices speaking. God speaks, but anonymous voices cry out as well:

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD” A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” (verses 3a, 6).

The city of Jerusalem is identified as a messenger of good news in verse 9 of Isaiah 40 (NRSVUE):

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news

Here, the high mountain from which good news is to be announced stands in contrast to an earlier promise of the leveling of mountains and valleys to speed God’s arrival in verses 3-5.

Into the Lesson

Isaiah 40 delivers a hopeful message to God’s people of impending deliverance from their captivity and an invitation to wait on God (verse 31). This chapter sets the tone for the following chapters. In Isaiah 55, there is a promise that God would renew both the land and the people who live in it.

Isaiah 40:1-11 may be divided into the following four sections:

- God’s announcement of comfort and an end to punishment (verses 1-2);



Isaiah 40 delivers a hopeful message of
impending deliverance.

- A heavenly voice announcing the coming of the Redeemer God (verses 3-5);
- The prophet's message of God's faithfulness (verses 6-8);
- The call to the city of Jerusalem to announce good news (verses 9-11).

In today's text, we hear more than one voice speaking. Illustrating the interwoven nature of the entire book of Isaiah, as stated earlier, the scene in chapter 40 calls to mind the description of Isaiah's call described in chapter 6. There, the setting is the heavenly council in which multiple voices are heard. There, the prophet speaks (see verses 1, 5, and 8). Heavenly beings sing or speak (see verses 3 and 7). And God speaks (see verses 8-13).

God speaks first in Isaiah 40:1 and sets the tone with a command to the prophet to bring a message of comfort to those who have been oppressed:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

The tone of Isaiah 40 reminds us that prophetic ministry does not only consist in delivering messages of God's judgment. In fact, a spotlight is shone on God's tenderness in verse 11. The task of prophetic preaching is both *to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable*.

The Exile experience was interpreted as God's punishment for the people's unfaithfulness. However, the prophet was directed not only to announce the end of the prison sentence but also to interpret the pain as double in nature:

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins (verse 2).

People often reassure one another that suffering makes us stronger. But does it always? Suffering that is experienced as meaningless can drive us into despair. The message of Isaiah 40 is that as bewildering as events around the Babylonian Exile had been, God was still involved somehow with God's people. Whether our



A spotlight is shone on God's tenderness.

suffering makes us stronger or not, it can certainly deepen our compassion for our neighbors.

Verse 2 announces good news: Jerusalem had done her time! But the message that the punishment received had been double may be jarring to our ears. Those who have served prison sentences as a penalty for a crime are said to have paid their debts to society when they have done their time. However, many have experienced that life on the outside continues to inflict a penalty as they struggle to reenter society. As prophetic people, how can we bring hope to those in this situation or similar circumstances?

In verse 3, a voice from within the heavenly council announced God's imminent arrival:

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for
our God.”

This section envisions the wondrous lifting of valleys and leveling of mountains to speed God's arrival. The call to create a highway in the wilderness may be spoken to others in the heavenly council rather than to the prophet. Verse 5 proclaims that the work that God was about to do would take place on a worldwide stage rather than just among the people of Israel:

“Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

The universal nature of God's redeeming work is proclaimed throughout Isaiah 40–66.³



In verse 6a, an anonymous voice challenges the prophet: “A voice says, ‘Cry out!’” The natural response is, “What shall I cry?” The message that the prophet was to deliver to God’s people in verses 6c-7a and 8b (NRSVUE) is a classic “bad news, good news” announcement:

All flesh is grass;
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers; the flower fades, . . .
but the word of our God will stand forever.

This message concerning our human frailty and often fading resolve is not an invitation to cynicism about human affairs. Rather, our human tendency to fall away is set in sharp contrast to God’s abiding faithfulness. This is a call to place ultimate trust in the One who is forever trustworthy.

In verses 9-11, it is the change in outward and visible circumstances that will announce the good news. The Hebrew word translated “herald of good news” occurs twice in verse 9. A restored Jerusalem would be the harbinger of the good news that God was on the move, both to restore and to build up.

Into Discipleship

Living Through the Desert Times

Sooner or later, we all experience those dry times—times when nothing seems to be happening. The desert images in our text remind the readers of the Exodus experience. The movement from slavery towards freedom had to pass

through a desert time. The people of the Exodus generation were moving from one kind of life to another—from a life of slavery in Egypt (where the most important choices had already been made for them) towards the promise of freedom. But the journey to freedom can be a dry and thirsty business. Their wilderness experience is a picture of the human condition. Sometimes, change is thrust upon us. But the promise of something new is not always enough to keep us from looking back at the way things used to be.

It is not hard for us to rewrite our history. The conditions and experiences of the past can begin to take on a kind of glow that they never had when we were living through them. The dry and thirsty wilderness experience prompted the people of the Exodus to complain to (and about) Moses.

In those times when we move from one way of life towards a way that is new and different, we may even wonder along with the people of the Exodus, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7b).

Stuck in Babylon but Longing for Jerusalem

How can we respond to life when we are not in the place we wish to be? Isaiah 40 sings about preparing a way for the Lord through the desert: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (verse 3). And what must we do while we wait? According to the NRSVUE,

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and assert, O Israel,

“My way is hidden from the LORD,
 and my right is disregarded by my God”? . . .
 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their
 strength;
 they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
 they shall run and not be weary;
 they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:27, 31)

The life of a faithful disciple sometimes requires patient waiting on the Lord.

On Being a Herald of Good Tidings

There are those times in life when things seem constantly to move in the wrong direction. The promise in Scripture is that it is possible to move forward—in God’s time. We cannot move back and undo the mistakes of the past. But we can move forward in hope. In the Children’s Hospital in Denver in the neonatal intensive care unit, there was a bulletin board they called their “Graduates Board.” It was covered with pictures of growing, healthy children who had started life in great difficulty in that hospital and had moved through it with help. A few years ago, I was visiting a parent who had a sick child at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. As we walked together down the corridor towards the elevators, I suddenly realized that we were walking through a “Hall of Hope.” On the wall were large pictures of children who had been helped in their

struggle to move from life-threatening illness toward help and healing.

Hope is inspired most often by action that changes the present reality somehow. It is called forth by deeds that change our story and give us some vision of what is possible.

Isaiah 40:9 issues a challenge to those who have good news:

Get you up to a high mountain,
 O Zion, herald of good news;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
 lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 “Here is your God!” (NRSVUE)

Jesus’ disciples are called not only to tell the Gospel story to their neighbors (see Acts 1:8) but *to be the good news as well* (see Matthew 25:31-46). When we are faithful to that calling, our lives declare to the world, “Here is your God!”

Notes

1. “The Old Testament Book Known as the ‘Fifth Gospel,’” *Catholic Star Herald* South Jersey’s Official Catholic News Source: February 24, 2011. <https://catholicstarherald.org/the-old-testament-book-known-as-the-fifth-gospel/>.
2. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd Ed., Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 763.
3. For example, see the Servant Song in Isaiah 42:1-4.

Boomerangs to Arrows: A Godly Guide for Launching Young Adult Children

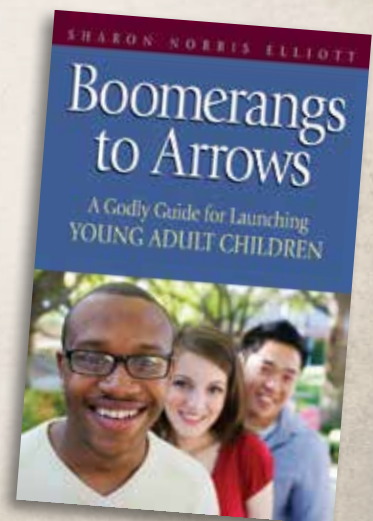
By Sharon Norris Elliott

“A valuable resource for parents who desire to help their grown children build a successfully independent life that reflects God’s purposes for them. You will find Sharon’s insights biblically sound, convicting, and also encouraging. While not specifically addressing the role of grandparents, they also could benefit from reading *Boomerangs*.”

—Cavin T. Harper, Executive Director,
 Christian Grandparenting Network, www.christiangrandparenting.net

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Closing Prayer

Loving God, we confess that we do not always take up the good task that you set before us. Thank you for your constant love and faithfulness towards the whole human family. Shine your light through our lives so that we may be heralds of your good news to the world. We pray that you would make us comforters to all who live with sorrow during this Advent season. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- The root meaning of the word *Gospel* is “good news.” What is the good news message of the book of Isaiah that has led some commentators to call it “the fifth Gospel”?
- Chapters 40–55 of Isaiah contain the four Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 49:1-6; Isaiah 50:4-11; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Throughout the centuries,

Christians have seen Jesus portrayed in these passages. As you read and reflect on each of these passages, what about them sounds like a description of Jesus to you?

■ Into the Lesson

- Our text contrasts God’s faithfulness with human frailty and lack of constancy of purpose. The prophet wrote, “All flesh is grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field” (Isaiah 40:6c, NRSVUE). What are some examples from your own experience of this human tendency?
- In verses 10 and 11, the writer affirms that God is *both strong and tenderhearted*. When have you needed the assurance of God’s strength in your life? When has the promise of God’s tenderness inspired hope within your life situation?

■ Into Discipleship

- Have you ever been stuck in your own Babylon, longing to return to your Jerusalem? What was happening at that time in your life? Who or what helped you to get unstuck?
- Think of the way that the Denver Children’s Hospital and the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia inspired hope in my family with pictures of children who had experienced recovery. What has called forth hope within you in times of fear and doubt? How can our churches serve as “Halls of Hope” for those in need?



Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Comfort, Comfort Ye, My People,” sung by St. John’s Episcopal Church (Melody by Claude Goudimel [16th century], arranged and performed by Thomas Edward Morgan, baritone; Text by Johann Olearius, translated by Catherine Winkworth): <https://youtu.be/nktjt7dPkYU?si=O2fDYXyzAqvqEfBO>

“Comfort, comfort ye my people; speak ye peace,”
thus saith our God.

“Comfort those who sit in darkness, mourning ’neath
their sorrows’ load.

Speak ye to Jerusalem of the peace that waits for
them;

Tell her that her sins I cover, and her warfare now is
over.” . . .

“Make ye straight what long was crooked, make the
rougher places plain;

Let your hearts be true and humble, as befits his holy
reign.

For the glory of the Lord now o’er Earth is shed
abroad,

And all flesh shall see the token that the word is never
broken.”

- “Comfort Ye My People” from Handel’s *Messiah* (sung by Jerry Hadley; lyrics by Charles Wesley): <https://youtu.be/8dDjva1ecYo?si=U6F9YfxyyvL4tUmD>
- Handel’s *Messiah*—“Part I: Isaiah’s Prophecy of Salvation (Scene 1)”: Anthony Rolfe-Johnson, Tenor: <https://youtu.be/KK7FCS8QP5Q>

Media Idea

Be on the lookout for the new film supported by ABHMS—*Are We There Yet?* When it is available on YouTube, plan a movie night to watch and discuss the film. You can read about it via the following link: <https://abhms.org/about-us/mission-stories/abhms-grant-supports-innovative-film-produced-by-evangelical-outsiders/>

Baptist Connection

Share the article “Calling All Prophets” by Rev. Justin Cox (*The Christian Citizen*, August 21, 2023). Discuss the importance of modern-day prophets and in what context they can be a blessing to the church and society. <https://christiancitizen.us/calling-all-prophets/>

Activity Idea

As a class, you may wish to try your hand at setting Isaiah 40:1-11 to music. You may wish to divide the verses among members of the class. Feel free to paraphrase. One hymn tune to use is ANTIOCH C.M. (“Joy to the World!”), where the syllable count is: 8 6 8 6 6 6. Of course, the class may think of an alternative tune to try. When you complete this activity, be sure to sing your hymn together.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Second Sunday of Advent

Week of December 10, 2023

Sunday, December 10

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Monday, December 11

Psalm 27; Isaiah 26:7-15; Acts 2:37-42

Tuesday, December 12

Psalm 27; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 11:1-18

Wednesday, December 13

Psalm 27; Malachi 2:10–3:1; Luke 1:5-17

Thursday, December 14

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 2:1-5; Philippians 3:7-11

Friday, December 15

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:2-6; Philippians 3:12-16

Saturday, December 16

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:13-19; Matthew 21:28-32

RELEASE

the year of the Lord's favor

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.

—ISAIAH 61:1-2a

Introduction

Luke's gospel (see 4:16-27) tells us that Jesus claimed for himself the prophetic role described in today's text. At the inauguration of his public ministry, Jesus announced the direction that his mission would take when he read from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue service in Nazareth. This passage in Isaiah 61 promises good news to those who have been waiting for deliverance. A text of stark contrasts, the good news is set against the backdrop of various forms of oppression and sorrow. We are reminded that like a master gardener, the God who loves justice will cause righteousness and praise to grow for all the world to see. Those who hear this good news are called to join in the effort to build up and to repair what lies in ruins.

Lesson Objectives

- To explore some of the ways that today's text makes use of other Scripture passages.
- To celebrate together the joyous tone of Isaiah 61 on this third Sunday in Advent.
- To consider concrete ways that we might help to bring liberty to those held captive by forces beyond their control.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 NRSV

1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness

instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. . . . 8 For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Into the Scripture

During much of the twentieth century, a scholarly consensus held that the book of Isaiah could be divided into three parts, each from a different period in history. The first part (Isaiah 1–39) was written by Isaiah of Jerusalem, during the ascendancy of the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BCE. However, Isaiah 40–55 (Second Isaiah) seems to come from the sixth century BCE during the Babylonian Exile. Cyrus the Great of Persia

was on the rise and after conquering the Babylonian Empire, he would allow captive peoples to return to their homelands. Chapters 56–66 (Third Isaiah) were thought to have come from a period after the return from exile.

While this three-part division of the book of Isaiah into watertight

compartments no longer holds sway among most scholars, it does seem clear that chapters 40–66 come from a different period in history than do most of the chapters in the first part of the book. The exiles had great hopes for the rule of Cyrus, who is mentioned in 44:28; 45:1; and 45:13.



Cyrus the Great of Persia
would allow captive
peoples to return to their
homelands.

The four Servant Songs found in earlier chapters (see 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13–53:12) have traditionally been read by Christians as prophecies of Jesus, the Suffering Servant. In their original context, these poems may have described an individual, or a group, or the entire nation of Israel. The Servant is one (or a group) who bears witness to God's redeeming love and calls the people back to faithfulness. The first such song begins,



“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, . . . he will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1). The language of today’s text in Isaiah 61 begins in much the same way:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me; . . .
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners (verse 1).

The verb translated “anointed” (Hebrew: *mashach*) shares the same root as the word *Messiah* (Hebrew: *mashiach*). It is entirely possible that Isaiah 61 is a fifth Servant Song.¹ But what is the nature of the servant described in our passage? The text speaks of anointing, which typically applied to the installation of kings or priests. However, in 1 Kings 19:16, Elijah was commanded to anoint both Nimshi as king and Elisha as prophet. The anonymous prophet of Isaiah 61 was anointed to bring good news of redemption and a reversal of fortune to the oppressed:

[The Lord] has sent me to bring good news to
the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners (verse 1b).

Verse 2 refers to the year of the Lord’s favor. This is undoubtedly a reference to the sabbatical year prescribed by the Torah (see Exodus 21:1-11 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18). Every seventh year, enslaved people might be set free: “When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt” (Exodus 21:2).

The year of the Lord’s favor also applies to the so-called “Jubilee Year” that occurred after seven cycles

of seven years (in the fiftieth year). This was a year in which hereditary land should be returned to the original owner. “That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: . . . In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property” (Leviticus 25:11-12b, 13). God’s people are warned against the attempt to amass great holdings of land because the land ultimately belongs to the Lord. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine [God’s]; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Leviticus 25:23). The prophet affirms one of the great themes of the Hebrew Bible: God loves justice and hates wrongdoing (see Isaiah 61:8). To those who experienced the Exile, God holds out the possibility of a reset of the divine-human relationship. An everlasting covenant is promised between God and God’s people.

Into the Lesson

God brings peace, justice, and good news through the ministries of God’s servants. In each of the four Servant Songs, the word “servant” (Hebrew: *‘ebed*) is applied to the one being introduced (see Isaiah 42:1; 49:3, 6; 50:10; 52:13). The job description for the servant varies across these passages. In Isaiah 42, *justice* is the key word; God declares the following:



The year of the Lord’s favor also applies to
the “Jubilee Year.”

I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
. . . [My servant] will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth (verses
1b, 3b-4b).

Isaiah 49:1-6 contains a call to bring light in darkness. Isaiah 50:4-9 speaks of listening and bringing enlightenment. Isaiah 52 and 53 speak of the redemptive suffering of the Servant. However, just as scholars have moved away from a rigid scheme dividing the book of Isaiah into three distinct parts, so now some question whether the Servant Songs themselves can be isolated from their contexts in Isaiah.² It seems that the role of the servant in Isaiah is more fluid than previously thought. At various times and in diverse circumstances, the servant role may apply to specific individuals such as a king or prophet, or to God's people, Israel.

While the word *servant* is not used in Isaiah 61, today's text clearly tells of a prophetic call to service—a service that proclaims the good news of God's redemptive actions. The speaker introduces himself in verse 1 with language like that found in Isaiah 42:1:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me (61:1).

Then this servant of God outlines his job description with a series of action words: to bring good news (verse 1), to bind up (verse 1), to proclaim (verse 1 and verse 2), to comfort (verse 2), to provide and to give (verse 3). Considering the variety of service mentioned in today's text as well as that found in the four earlier passages in Isaiah, we are led to understand that those who are God's servants are a diverse group. The Apostle Paul would write to the Corinthians, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:4-5).

We noted earlier that Isaiah 61 was the Scripture that Jesus read in his hometown synagogue at the beginning of his public ministry. It should not be surprising then that the kinds of circumstances cited in the first four verses of our text—captivity, mourning, oppression—are highlighted in Jesus' beatitudes (see Luke 6:20-23; Matthew 5:3-11). Isaiah 61 and the New Testament passages announce the inbreaking of God's kingdom and relief from oppression.



Those who are God's servants are a diverse group.

The first part of our passage ends with verse 4:

They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

The "they" in this verse refers to all those in the circumstances mentioned in verses 1-3: the oppressed, those in captivity, and those who mourn.

The prophet holds out the promise that those who have suffered oppression will experience relief. More than this, however, they themselves will have a hand in the promised restoration, including the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonian invaders in 586 BCE. Construction of the Second Temple began around 536 BCE and was completed around 516 BCE. King Herod greatly expanded it in the time of Jesus. God is the speaker in verses 8 and 9. We are reminded that God loves justice (Hebrew: *mishpat*) and hates robbery and injustice. God's redemptive actions will have worldwide effects. The people relieved of oppressive circumstances will—by their renewed lives—bear witness to the entire world that the Lord has blessed them.

Their descendants shall be known among the
nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has
blessed (Isaiah 61:9).



The voice of the prophet is heard again in verses 10 and 11. The eagerly anticipated redemption from oppression that God had promised will be cause for celebration. The language in verse 10 suggests the joy of a wedding:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, . . .
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels
(Isaiah 61:10).

The images in verse 11 suggest the growth and vitality of a garden growing up before the gardener's eyes:

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring
up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Rather than the growth of plants, however, it will be righteousness and praise that emerge—growth that will be visible to all the surrounding nations.

Into Discipleship

A “Good News” Challenge

Advent, like Lent, is a season in which we are invited to reflect on God's claim on our lives. It can be a time of listening for that still, small voice. What is it that God's Spirit may be calling us to do this year? The writer of our text celebrates God's call to announce good news

to those most in need of it. Good news comes in many forms. When a loved one has recovered from serious illness or injury, that is good news. When, after many months of hard work, a pastoral search committee is led to the right candidate to become the next installed pastor, that is good news. When a loved one returns safely from a military deployment, that is good news.

Some might think of winning the lottery when we talk about good news. We had a woman in one of our churches who was a software engineer for the company that ran the lottery in our area. As she watched who was purchasing most of the lottery tickets in the corner stores, her conscience began to trouble her. She explained that she had come to believe that the lottery was a kind of tax on the poor. Her good news was that God's Spirit led her to leave that job and find employment elsewhere.

Finding Community After Release

The announcement of release to the prisoners is one part of the prophet's call. We should not rush to spiritualize this part of the message. When an inmate is released from a prison system, the movement into freedom does not always happen immediately. While I was serving a church in western Colorado, a man came to our church office one day asking for some milk and bread. As we drove together to the store to purchase these items, he told me his story. Half of his life—twenty of his forty years—had been spent behind bars in some extremely tough prisons.

From the outside looking in it seemed that the years must have toughened him. He told me that he had boxed competitively in prison, so he knew how to handle physical threats. But as we talked, he revealed the great difficulty he was experiencing just adjusting to life outside prison walls. This man was unsure of his ability to stay out of trouble. He was on the outside, but he had not yet experienced release! People like him need the community to find ways to ease them back into society. Whether with offers of jobs and rides or inclusion in congregational activities, our churches can contribute to that effort with a warm and practical welcome. The prophet in today's text was also charged with bringing comfort to those who mourn.

To provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning (61:3a).

A Blue Christmas?

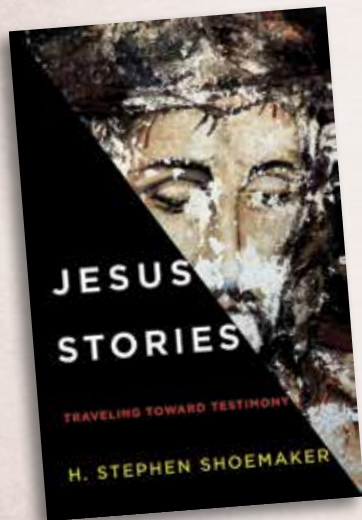
Our text invites us to consider the ways in which we try to comfort those who mourn. What should we do or say to someone who misses a loved one? It is not often

helpful to offer suggestions about how those left behind should feel in their grief. Sitting wordless with a friend who is sorrowful can be a powerful gift. Bringing a meal to the home may also bring comfort.

This time of year, from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day (the holiday season), is not a happy time for everyone. Some experience a deep sadness as they remember happier times with loved ones no longer present. To address this common situation, some churches offer a Blue Christmas service. This can be a worship experience in which we affirm that we are not alone in our feelings and that God's Spirit may move among us and through us to bring comfort. It is a time in which we present ourselves to the Lord and thank God for those we have loved who are no longer with us but whose lives still touch our own.

Notes

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year—Year B: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 14.
2. John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), *Servant and Covenant* (Isa. 41:21–42:17), Olive Tree.



Jesus Stories: Traveling Towards Testimony

By H. Stephen Shoemaker

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Closing Prayer

Redeemer God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us this Advent season that we might become good news to all who are oppressed. Send us as comfort to those who mourn. O Lord, grant that we might share your love of justice. Lead us away from all wrongdoing and day by day make us more like Jesus. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- We learned that Christians have seen pictures of Jesus in the Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah. It has even been suggested that Isaiah 61 sounds like a fifth song. In what ways does today's text seem to describe Jesus' public ministry? Are there ways in which it differs significantly from Jesus' work? If so, what are the differences?

- Old Testament teaching on the sabbatical year addresses the treatment of enslaved Israelites. As you read Exodus 21:1-11 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18, what differences and similarities do you find between slavery in Old Testament Israel and the practice in the United States?

■ Into the Lesson

- As noted, the servant of God in Isaiah 61 outlines his job description with a series of action words: to bring good news, to bind up, to proclaim, to comfort, to provide, and to give. If your congregation ministers to the world in any of these ways, share with each other what you do and why.
- The first verse of today's text declares, "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, . . . [the Lord] has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed." Who are the oppressed in your community? What is the good news that you and your church can bring to them?

■ Into Discipleship

- What do you do or say to comfort others in times of grief? If you have experienced the loss of a loved one, what were the most helpful things that those around you said or did to offer comfort to you in your sorrow?
- The effects of good news may sometimes be inconvenient. Thinking of the software engineer who gave up working for the lottery, what sort of courage do you imagine her decision required? If you sense God's calling you to make a change in your life this Advent season, what inconvenient changes might you need to make? What are some ways that we, as Christ's disciples, can support each other through these changes?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," sung by Grace Community Church Congregation and Choir: <https://youtu.be/0ZqbHosx6sc?si=2BXXqco0NfBRpxn1>

O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace! . . . My gracious Master and my God,



assist me to proclaim, to spread through all the earth abroad the honors of Thy name.

Jesus! the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease; 'tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life, and health, and peace. He breaks the pow'r of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free; His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me. To God all glory, praise, and love be now and ever given by saints below and saints above, the Church in earth and heaven. . . .

- “My Redeemer Lives,” sung by Nicole C. Mullen: <https://youtu.be/wC6RXAJpPjo?si=2UbYBQnoXldcNPIs>
- “Vinesong—Isaiah 61” (lyric video for “Isaiah 61” as featured on the album *Your Anointing* by Vinesong): https://youtu.be/7k_NnfUpav0

Media Option

We often romanticize our images of Jesus. View and discuss the video clip of Jesus’ reading the Isaiah prophecy from the series “The Chosen.” Whose side might we have been on if we had been present in the aftermath of the reading? https://youtu.be/PMO0ykVs8t4?si=z_2vYCCSPFCvNoF4

Activity Idea

The Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom and Equality (SAFE) was founded by Susan Burton to assist women released from prison to reenter society. The SAFE Housing Network is a national collective of formerly incarcerated people working to decarcerate the U.S. by bringing people home to stay. Read more about

SAFE and their impact here and discuss how you might get involved.

- <https://anewwayoflife.org/safe-housing-network/>
- <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/ardellas-house-tonie-willis-reentry-20230701.html>

Devotional Scriptures Year B Third Sunday of Advent Week of December 17, 2023

Sunday, December 17

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Monday, December 18

Psalm 125; 1 Kings 18:1-18; Ephesians 6:10-17

Tuesday, December 19

Psalm 125; 2 Kings 2:9-22; Acts 3:17-4:4

Wednesday, December 20

Psalm 125; Malachi 3:16-4:6; Mark 9:9-13

Thursday, December 21

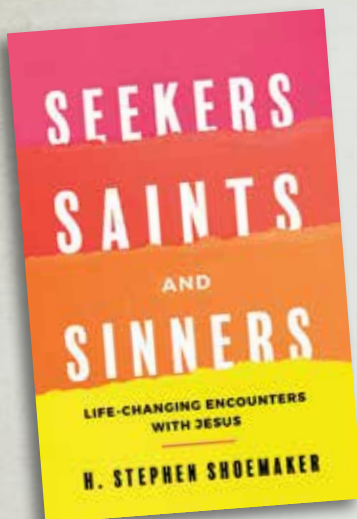
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4

Friday, December 22

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:12-19; Hebrews 1:5-14

Saturday, December 23

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Judges 13:2-24; John 7:40-52



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By H. Stephen Shoemaker

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“For nothing will be impossible with God.”

—LUKE 1:37

Introduction

The first two chapters of Luke's gospel, called the Infancy Narrative, contain the much-beloved stories of angels, shepherds, mothers, and special babies. Over the years we have heard these beautiful stories in sermon and song and pictured them on Christmas cards. Our challenge is to hear today's text as a radical call to discipleship. The story of the Annunciation to Mary challenges us concerning whether we really believe the angel Gabriel's claim that “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). Luke tells us that Mary accepted God's call to bear the Messiah for the benefit of Jews and Gentiles alike. This familiar Bible story invites us to follow Mary's example of faithful discipleship.

Lesson Objectives

- To explore the place of women, the poor, and those on the margins of society in Luke's narrative.
- To reflect on Mary's readiness to obey God's will as an example of faithful discipleship.
- To consider the possibility that God may send us as angels to someone who needs help and hope.

Luke 1:26-38 NRSV

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 35 The angel said to her, “The

Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Into the Scripture

The gospel of Luke is traditionally attributed to Luke, the beloved physician. It is part of a two-volume work that includes the Acts of the Apostles. Luke tells the story of God’s Holy Spirit at work in Jesus of Nazareth and in the men and women of the early Church. While we cannot be certain when or to whom the gospel was written, we know that the original readers spoke Greek, that they probably had at least some familiarity with the Scriptures in Greek translation (the Septuagint, abbreviated LXX), and that they were most likely already Christians (see Luke 1:4). The gospel of Luke was probably written between AD 80 and 90 to assure Christians of their common story. Luke set his story in a worldwide context. Jesus’ birth is placed within a census

in the Roman Empire. And whereas the gospel of Matthew traces Jesus’ lineage back to Abraham through David, Luke shows how Jesus’ story goes all the way back to Adam, who represents the beginning of all humanity.

The gospels of Luke and Matthew both follow the sequence of Jesus’

public ministry as found in the Gospel of Mark. In addition to Mark, they had access to a sayings source (often called “Q”) containing the teaching of Jesus. Matthew had access to additional material (often called “M”) and Luke had access to his own special content (often called “L”).¹ After the prologue in Luke 1:1-4, the remainder of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2 make up Luke’s Infancy Narrative (see Luke 1:5–2:52). Luke’s



Luke shows how Jesus’ story goes all the way back to Adam.

Infancy Narrative depends on Luke’s content from “L.” Gabriel’s appearance to Mary is traditionally called “The Annunciation.”

Both Luke and Matthew are concerned to show the continuity of God’s work before the birth of Christ with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Whereas Matthew quotes texts from the Old Testament to prove that the events in Jesus’ life were foretold, Luke, on the other hand, weaves the style of the Old Testament into his narrative. The Old Testament contains several annunciation scenes (e.g., Judges 13:2-7 and Genesis 18:1-15), and Luke follows the pattern found in these older accounts. There is an angelic visitor, a proclamation, the need to overcome some human deficiency, and a sign offered to confirm the announcement. A similar pattern is found in Old Testament accounts of prophetic calls (e.g., Exodus 3:1–4:17 and Jeremiah 1:4-10).

The account of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus follows on the angelic announcement





to Zechariah regarding the birth of John the Baptist. Luke connects Zechariah's and Elizabeth's story with Mary's in verse 26, which begins, "In the sixth month." This refers to the development of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Additionally, the interaction that Gabriel had with both Zechariah and Mary followed a similar format.² The sequence is as follows in Luke 1:

- An introductory word (for Mary: 1:28); (for Zechariah: 1:13)
- Commission (for Mary: 1:30-33); (for Zechariah: 1:14-17)
- Objection (for Mary: 1:34); (for Zechariah: 1:18)
- Reassurance (for Mary: 1:35); (for Zechariah: 1:19)
- A sign is given (for Mary: 1:36-37); (for Zechariah: 1:20)
- Obedient response (for Mary: 1:38); (No corresponding statement for Zechariah.)

Luke is using a rhetorical device common in that era whereby he compares "good" (Zechariah) with "better" (Mary). Two important differences emerge between the Zechariah and the Mary sequences. First, the sign given to Zechariah is negative: he is temporarily unable to speak because of his resistance. Mary, on the other hand, is told that the Holy Spirit would work a miracle within her. Second, the Mary sequence ends in verse 38 with her readiness to be obedient to God's will for her. This piece is missing from Gabriel's interaction with Zechariah. Just as Luke tied the appearance of Gabriel to Mary with the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah in verse 26, he would then connect the two stories again in 1:29, where we read of Mary's journey to Elizabeth (traditionally called "the Visitation").

Into the Lesson

Today's story tells of a messenger from God who delivered startling news to a young woman, news which seemed to be impossible. Luke's account of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary is about the power of God's Holy Spirit to effect change in situations that may seem unchangeable. God's Spirit is the original Spirit of Christmas, seeking to break through the walls we have built, enabling us to begin again.

In verse 26, Luke tells us, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth." The angel was coming to Mary to tell her that she was going to conceive and bear a child before she and Joseph began living together as husband and wife. Gabriel said to Mary, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (verse 28). Understandably, Mary was greatly troubled by this greeting. How will she respond to the message? Whenever angels appear to people in Luke's Gospel, the realistic human emotion experienced by those who receive the message is one of fear at first. Angels unexpectedly brought the holiness and the power of God into the everyday life of ordinary people, and that is not something that we can experience comfortably. In fact, Mary was startled by the appearance of God's messenger.

We may never experience an angelic visitation as Mary did. However, we might receive messages from God through other kinds of angels. Remember that the word "angel" comes from a Greek word which simply means



"Angel" comes from a Greek word which simply means "messenger."

“messenger.” And God can use many kinds of messengers to get through to us. It can be by means of events that grab our attention in some way—perhaps a special worship service, or a week at summer camp, or a close brush with death. Any of these can be occasions for God to communicate God’s will for our lives. God still sends angels, messengers to open us out to the world around us and to call forth the life that God has placed within us. Our angel can be another person—a schoolteacher or a Sunday School teacher, a stranger on the street, someone who says something to us at just the right time—telling us something that we need to hear about our situation.

Recall that in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge was visited at night by three spirits which resulted in a dramatic change in his life. As mentioned earlier, a second truth contained in our Bible story this morning is that the Spirit of God is the original Spirit of Christmas. The Spirit creates life and possibilities where none was seen to exist before. Mary objected, “How can I have a baby when I have not yet slept with a man?” (see verse 34). The answer is that God’s Spirit makes possible what seems to be impossible.

God’s Spirit is creative and life-giving and life-changing! In Genesis 1:2, we read, “The earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (NRSVUE). But the word translated “wind” (Hebrew: *Ruach*) is also often translated as “spirit.” Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* reads, “Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss” (<https://biblia.com/books/message/Ge1>). Sometimes “complete chaos” or “a soup of nothingness” may be apt descriptions of how our lives feel. But the Creator brings light where there is only darkness. What Mary thought to be impossible was not only possible but certain. Gabriel reminded her, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (verse 37).

In telling us the stories of Zechariah and Mary, Luke is using a rhetorical method of his day where “good” is compared with “better.” What emerges from today’s story is that Mary had a willing and yielded spirit, a spirit that responded creatively and positively to the initiative of God’s Spirit in her life. Gabriel’s words in verse 37 are full of promise for us in the coming new year. But Mary’s words in verse 38a are a call to action: “Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord;

let it be with me according to your word.’” Luke weaves Old Testament themes into his narrative to stress the continuity of God’s work across time. The word translated “servant” (Greek: *Doulé*) in verse 38 has sometimes been rendered “handmaid” (e.g., RSV and KJV). It is the word from which we get “doula.” However, Luke wants the reader to understand that Mary is a servant of the Lord like those in the Servant Songs of the book of Isaiah (see Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 49:1-6; Isaiah 50:4-11; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12).³ Mary was a young female, likely poor, stuck temporarily between her father’s house and that of her husband-to-be’s. By worldly standards she seemed to have little going for her. Yet, God moved in her life in a powerful way, and she responded in faithful obedience. Accordingly, Mary is the first Christian disciple (and Luke’s first female prophet).⁴

Into Discipleship

The Angels in My Life

This time of year, we see pictures of heavenly angels with halos and wings on our Christmas cards. And we see angels portrayed in movies such as *The Bishop’s Wife* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*. As far as I know, however, I have never seen angels like that. But, at various times in my life, I have encountered earthly angels: people who look a lot like you and me. They are people who have brought some word or deed of grace into my life at just the right time. Sometimes we see their faces and learn their names, sometimes we do not. But they serve as agents of God’s gracious presence in our midst.

Our first year in seminary, Rhonda and I were full-time students and part-time employees. Between us we had three jobs totaling forty hours a week at minimum wage. By the time the bills were paid, we sometimes had more days in the week left than we had money. This was the point in my life at which my wisdom teeth began to grow in, but they grew sideways! I was getting holes in my cheeks where the teeth were poking. These teeth needed to be pulled. But how could we afford it? Where would the money come from?

One day while we were wondering what to do, I went to retrieve the mail from my student mailbox at the seminary. There in my box sat a mysterious white envelope—no names telling me who sent it. I opened the suspicious-looking envelope, and it contained no note. *But there was a \$50 bill tucked inside!* That proved to be



just the right amount at that time to pay for having two teeth pulled. I never discovered who put that money in my mailbox, but it arrived at just the right time. Oftentimes we do not know the names of the earthly angels we meet. And sometimes, we do not even see their faces. But in the fall of 1974, I had no doubt that somebody had been sent by God as a gift-giver of God's grace in my time of need!

Sometimes the angels in our lives offer some word of encouragement or gentle correction when life surprises us and throws us off balance. In early 1981, our son was unexpectedly born with Down Syndrome. Two days later he was flown from Western Colorado to Denver Children's Hospital and taken to a neo-natal intensive care unit. It was all so confusing and unexpected and worrying. I had a jumble of feelings about parenting a handicapped child. Was I up to the task?

A genetic counselor at the hospital met with us to listen to our concerns and to share information. Referring to our baby, I asked her, "Are *these children* always so sleepy?" Picking up on my attitude beneath my question, that woman looked me in the eye, and kindly but forcefully said, "*These children are very valuable. Their lives matter, too!*" Things began to change quickly for me from that point forward. I do not remember that

geneticist's name. After we left the hospital a few days later, I never saw her again. But in that one exchange, she had provided the gentle slap in the face that I needed to accept the child that had been born to us rather than to mourn the loss of the ideal child I had expected.

Sometimes, God's earthly messengers bring a word of wisdom or encouragement or even correction into our confusion: "Fear not!" We can move forward in the faith that God goes with us wherever life's twists and turns may take us. You and I may never see angels like the ones that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds did. But the Christmas story invites us to remember the people who have come as angels to us, at just the right time, agents of God's grace in our lives. Could God be calling you to become an angel to someone this season?

Notes

1. R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 9: The Gospel of Luke* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 7.
2. Brent Strawn, "The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts," computer software (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2006), Fourth Sunday of Advent-Year B, Gospel Lesson: Luke 1:26-38.
3. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 38.
4. Brent Strawn, "The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts," computer software (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2006), Fourth Sunday of Advent-Year B, Luke 1:26-38.

Closing Prayer

“For nothing will be impossible with God!” Lord, we have heard the promise in your Word. We stand with Mary and all generations of the faithful, and we declare: “We are the servants of the Lord. Let it be to us according to your Word.” Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- We noted that scholars believe that Luke had special material that he incorporated into the narrative of the first two chapters of his Gospel. Using your imagination, where do you suppose Luke might have found this special material? What are some of the possible sources?
- Luke follows the sequence of the gospel of Mark to tell the story of Jesus’ public ministry, death, and resurrection. If he had not included the first two chapters of his Gospel, how would that change your understanding of Jesus’ life?

■ Into the Lesson

- We do not know what expectations for the future Mary may have had. But we can guess that the angel’s message was not part of her plans for life. Our lives do not always play out according to our plans. Can you think of a time in your life when things did not go according to your plans? What was happening at that time? Were you able to sense God’s will in the change in plans?
- Luke shows a great sensitivity to people considered lowly or living on the margins of society such as the poor, shepherds, tax collectors, and women. Luke tells how God comes in love to save the least and the lost. If you were to make a list of “the least and the lost” in the 21st century, whom would you include? Why?

■ Into Discipleship

- Can you think of a time in your life when a stranger said or did something that came at just the right time? What was happening in your life then? What did your angel say (or do) that changed things for you?
- Some Christmas presents require some assembly or some use after we receive them. They come to us as both gift and task. Life as Christ’s disciples is like this. We receive God’s grace as a gift which calls for a life of faithful response. Reflecting on your own life as a disciple, how have you experienced the pattern of gift and task?



MERRY
Christmas

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came” (Basque carol paraphrased by Sabine Baring-Gould; Hope Publishing, 1987): <https://youtu.be/dKIc8JvxGbU?si=M5y2mbJzscSnTOnk>
- “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” fifth-century Christmas hymn composed by Aurelius Prudentius and sung by an a capella choir: <https://youtu.be/cOF9JLJkPis?si=hpU9BfExFBDipQx>
- “Mary, Did You Know?” sung by Pentatonix: <https://youtu.be/ifCWN5pJGIE>

Media Option

Plan a movie night to watch *Spirited*, “A musical version of Charles Dickens’s story of a miserly misanthrope who is taken on a magical journey.” (2022; PG-13; 2h 7m. Director: Sean Anders; Writers: Sean Anders and John Morris; Stars Will Ferrell, Ryan Reynolds, and Octavia Spencer.) (Trailer: https://www.imdb.com/video/vi2962539801/?ref_=tt_vi_i_2)

Baptist Connection

Consider participating in and supporting International Ministries. A message from Toya Richards: “In the wake of the hectic Christmas season when priorities sometimes turn sideways, I offer up this poem from theologian Howard Thurman as a reminder of our charge going forward. I also invite you to join me in that work as I help train God’s people at Cape Town Baptist Seminary. Make a recurring donation and help me reach 100 percent of my funding goal. Thank you!” (Dec. 2022)

(Toya is endorsed to serve in Cape Town, South Africa as a teacher and professor at the Cape Town Baptist Seminary—a ministry of IM partner the Baptist Union of Southern Africa). <https://internationalministries.org/author/t-richards/>

“The Work of Christmas” (Howard Thurman)

When the song of the angels is stilled,
 When the star in the sky is gone,
 When the kings and princes are home,
 When the shepherds are back with their flock,
 The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among others,
 To make music in the heart.

Activity Idea

Read Matthew’s account of the angelic appearance to Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25. Compare the features of Matthew’s narrative with those found in Luke 1:26-38. Identify the similarities and differences between the two. It may help to make a table of two columns using newsprint or a whiteboard (or blackboard).

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Fourth Sunday of Advent

Week of December 24, 2023

Sunday, December 24

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Sunday, December 24, and Monday, December 25

Nativity of the Lord—Proper I: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

Nativity of the Lord—Proper II: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20

Nativity of the Lord—Proper III: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14

Monday, December 25

Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Samuel 1:1-18; Hebrews 9:1-14

Tuesday, December 26

Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Samuel 1:19-28; Hebrews 8:1-13

Wednesday, December 27

Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Mark 11:1-11

Thursday, December 28

Psalm 148; Jeremiah 31:15-17; Matthew 2:13-18

Friday, December 29

Psalm 148; Isaiah 49:5-15; Matthew 12:46-50

Saturday, December 30

Psalm 148; Proverbs 9:1-12; 2 Peter 3:8-13

COMMITMENT

the importance of showing up

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

—LUKE 2:39

Introduction

What happens after the shepherds have gone back to their sheep and the angels have returned to heaven? In today's text, Luke continues the narrative of promise and tells of four humble people who were obedient to God and faithful in their spiritual practices. Forty days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem for the purification of Mary as prescribed in Leviticus 12. And they brought the infant Jesus for dedication (as commanded in Exodus 13). Jesus' observant parents met two elderly servants of God—Simeon and the prophet Anna—who had faithfully looked forward in hope to God's fulfillment of the promise of a redeemer for Israel. This beautiful story challenges us to consider the importance of showing up!

Lesson Objectives

- To gain an appreciation of the commitment of Anna and Simeon, two faithful older adults.
- To reflect on the small but crucial roles played in the drama of God's work in our world by those who never make the headlines.
- To consider how we may wait upon the Lord in hope by regularly "showing up" as disciples.

Luke 2:22-40 NRSV

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came

into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” 33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” 36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Into the Scripture

In last week’s lesson, we observed that Luke shows a special interest in the lowly and the outcast in society. He has set his narrative on a global stage, but in today’s text, he is casting a spotlight on the faithful of Israel. The expression “law of Moses” or “the law of the Lord” occurs nine times in the Gospel of Luke. It is found five times in today’s passage alone (see verses 22, 23, 24, 27, and 39). Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna—each in their own way—serve as examples of those who responded in faith to God’s promises and acted in obedience to the demands of Scripture.

Mary and Joseph make the journey to Jerusalem to perform what the Law demanded of them. Verse 22 begins, “When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses . . .” The phrase “their purification” is a reference to the instruction found in Leviticus 12:1-5 regarding the required purification of a woman forty days after childbirth. In the interest of moving the narrative forward, Luke has joined the

purification of Mary together with the consecration of Jesus as firstborn and holy as found in Exodus 13:1-2: “The LORD said to Moses, Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.”

Mary and Joseph offered “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,” which was an acceptable offering for people of humble means. Leviticus 12:8 reads, “If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a purification offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.” Regarding Jesus’ family background, Luke has a twofold emphasis. First, Jesus came from a religiously observant household. Second, he came from the poor of the land.

Luke introduces Simeon in verse 25 and describes him using the words “righteous and devout,” and we learn that Simeon was forward-looking, expecting the “consolation of Israel.” The Spirit is mentioned three times in relation to Simeon in verses 25-27. This is in keeping with Luke’s focus on the ministry of the Holy



Spirit throughout Luke and Acts. Verses 29-32 contain the beautiful Song of Simeon, known as the *Nunc dimittis* from the first few words of the Latin translation of the Greek text. Verse 30 quotes from Isaiah 52:10: “for my eyes have seen your salvation.” Quoting from Isaiah 42:6 and Isaiah 49:6, Simeon’s Song celebrates the worldwide importance of the arrival of this child of promise and God’s saving work:

“[Salvation] you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:31-32).

Luke’s message of salvation for all people, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile, runs throughout the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The emotional tone changes in verses 33-35, as the shadow of the cross falls across this encounter between Simeon and the holy family. Luke introduces the prophet Anna, another devout and elderly person, in verses 36-38. While we do not hear the words she spoke, Luke highlights her faithfulness and her customary practices of prayer and fasting. Anna is described as a prophet indicating an ongoing calling.

In verse 39, we are told that Jesus and his parents returned from Jerusalem to Galilee. Verse 40 serves as a kind of hinge verse: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” This concludes the Presentation story and points forward to Luke’s account of the boy Jesus in the Temple with the elders. Luke 2:52 ends the account of Jesus’ birth and childhood with words very similar to those found in verse 40: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

Into the Lesson

Luke stresses faithfulness across the generations: both God’s faithfulness and that of humble and obedient believers who keep the flame of hope alive through difficult times. The Infancy Narrative begins with a scene in the Temple (1:5-25)—where Luke introduces Zechariah and Elizabeth, whose family relationships are firmly rooted in the people of Israel. Luke further characterizes them as people of faith: “Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (1:6). We also learn that they were elderly (see verse 7).

Recall that Luke interacts with the Old Testament more often by following its narrative patterns than by direct quotation. This first scene is like the story in Genesis 18 of the angelic announcement to Abraham and Sarah concerning the conception and birth of an heir. In that case, it was Sarah who laughed doubtfully, whereas in Luke it was Zechariah who doubted. *In both cases, the message is that nothing is impossible with God!*

The scene then moves out of Jerusalem to Nazareth in Galilee, where Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel (see 1:26-38) and Jesus’ conception and birth was foretold. As we saw in last week’s lesson, Mary initially questioned Gabriel’s message, but then she responded



Luke has joined the purification of Mary together with the consecration of Jesus.

in obedience: “Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’” (1:38a).

The second Temple scene appears in today’s text as Mary and Joseph travel to Jerusalem for the purification rite for Mary and to present their firstborn son to the Lord. Not only are Mary and Joseph religiously observant, but they meet two faithful senior citizens in Anna and Simeon, who saw in the infant Jesus the fulfillment of their hopes for the redemption of Israel (see verses 25, 30, 38).

It is important to remember that the land was occupied by Rome at that time. Redemption would have meant not only spiritual revival but also liberation from foreign domination as well.

The prophet Anna is described in some detail in verses 36-37: “There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.”

While Anna does not have the same number of lines in this drama as Simeon does, her presence in the narrative underscores two important themes in Luke’s writing. First, Anna is described as a prophet in her own right. She is counted among the godly female leaders whom Luke portrays throughout Luke and Acts. And coupled with Simeon, she models leadership as both male and female. Second, Anna, like Simeon, is a person of the older generation. Luke shows the continuity of God’s faithful work through a people across the generations.

Luke takes us to the Temple a third time at the end of Luke 2 when Jesus and his family travel to Jerusalem for Passover (see verse 41). Luke emphasizes that this was customary for them, again underscoring the fact that Mary and Joseph were observant Jews. Without telling his parents what he was going to do, the boy Jesus lingers in the Temple to interact with the teachers. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, the narrative moves towards Jerusalem and then back again. The temptation sequence in Luke 4 ends with Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. Luke 4:13 ends that scene with these ominous words: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Luke 9:51 tells us that Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem and the Cross.

The last two verses of the gospel of Luke (24:51-52) tell of the disciples returning to Jerusalem following an encounter with the risen Jesus. The book of Acts then opens with the disciples’ receiving a commission to go into all the world in the power of the Holy Spirit, *beginning in Jerusalem and moving outwards* (see Acts 1:8). Simeon’s Song (see 2:29-32) is joyfully addressed to God. But a cloud suddenly passed over the scene as Simeon blessed the parents and addresses Mary directly: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:34-35). As we noted in the last section, the shadow of the Cross falls across the Infancy Narrative. Luke reminds us that the Gospel is not good news without the message of the Cross!

Into Discipleship

It Takes a Community

Several weeks after he was born in 2018, our younger grandson, Jack, was presented by his parents for blessing and dedication at their church. That Sunday, the pastor explained to the congregation that, as Baptists, we do not baptize infants, but we present them in dedication and blessing as a way of affirming their place in the community of believers. It is a hopeful ceremony. Nobody knows what the future may hold for any child, but we look in hope to the years ahead.



The Gospel is not good
news without the message
of the Cross!



The pastor carried baby Jack in her arms and walked around the entire congregation as she invited the people to call out in one word their hopes for him. *Courage. Health. Compassion. Belonging. Love.* The list of hopeful blessings was long. This was in fact a congregational prayer of blessing for one in their midst just beginning his life's journey. In God's providence, it took Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna to welcome Jesus into the community of faith and set him on a right path. How are we doing with that task in our own communities these days?

The Longing to Touch the Future

Many years ago, I was calling on a woman in the hospital who was dying. The illness was disfiguring her, which was quite upsetting to her. And some of her family could no longer bear to come visit. She was feeling increasingly isolated as the illness progressed. On one visit, she looked out the window of her hospital room and sighed deeply: "Oh! I wish that I could just hold a baby!" That was her prayer that afternoon.

In the face of life's brevity, our spirits reach for something beyond an immediate solution to life's pains and sorrows. Hope reaches out to the future. In her own way I believe that woman was expressing a heartfelt desire to connect with the future of humanity even as her own journey was coming to an end. We want to know, and we need to feel, that there is a future for the human family. Anna and Simeon rejoiced as they

met the infant Jesus and celebrated God's faithfulness. Because their faithfulness put them in the right place at the right time, each in their own way had touched God's future in hope!

The Importance of Passing the Baton

Each year at Christmas when we were visiting my in-laws, my mother-in-law, Amy, would prepare the Christmas stockings—one for each person present with his or her name marked at the top. Each stocking was carefully packed with candy and nuts and some unusual mechanical item "As Seen on TV." Throughout the year she carefully collected unusual items for the stockings, items meant to delight or amuse. I remember one year about halfway down the stocking contents, we discovered "flying monkeys"—little paper monkeys that came with a rubber band launcher. Soon the monkeys were flying in every direction across the room!

We did not receive flying monkeys each Christmas, but one thing was constant: In the toe of each stocking each year was an orange. Amy had grown up during the Great Depression when her family could not afford an elaborate Christmas. The orange in the toe of each Christmas stocking was something special, something to look forward to receiving.

My mother-in-law passed away in January 2010. That fall, our daughter announced that she was taking the Christmas stocking baton from her Grandma

Amy and would joyfully take on responsibility for the Christmas stockings. Not content to let that tradition get lost in the past, our daughter brought it forward into the present. Each stocking is carefully prepared with each name in mind. And in the toe of each Christmas stocking is an orange—reminding us of generosity even during lean times.

Luke's account of the Presentation of Jesus emphasizes that his parents and the loving elders who met him at the Temple were following the righteous practices of generations before. They stuck with it and showed up! That faithfulness put them all in the right place at the right time to witness the next step in the drama of God's saving work.

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In the face of life's brevity, our spirits reach for something beyond an immediate solution to life's pains and sorrows.

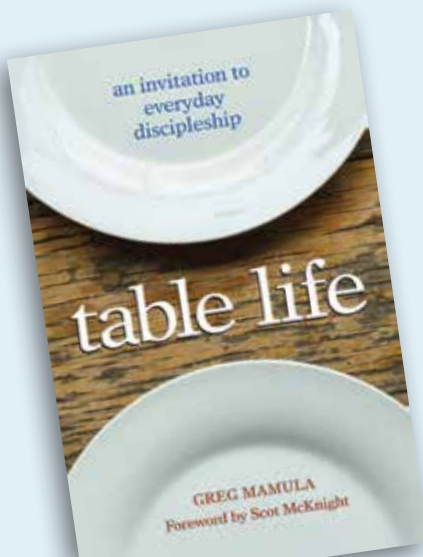


Table Life: An Invitation to Everyday Discipleship

by Greg Mamula

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Closing Prayer

God of hope and promise, thank you for the gift of faithful elders like Anna and Simeon who keep the flame of faith alive. And we thank you for our faithful mothers and fathers who introduce us to the Christian life and nurture us along the way. Help us to follow in their footsteps. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Christians have sometimes drawn a sharp contrast between Law and Gospel. However, in today's text Luke refers favorably five times to "the Law." What seems to be the relationship between Law and Gospel in Luke's understanding of the Good News?
- Senior citizens are sometimes stereotyped as being oriented towards the past. Anna and Simeon are both elderly but hopeful and future oriented. What words does Luke use to tell us about their spiritual practices and condition? You may wish to make a list for each of them.

■ Into the Lesson

- Luke tells a story of God's faithfulness at work through both male and female and young and old. How does your congregation encourage the participation of young and old in church leadership? Can you think of people who have been spiritual mentors in your church? What did they do that set them apart?
- We do not often reflect on the cross of Christ during the seasons of Advent and Christmas. Commentator Brent Strawn has written, "Too many sermons make the story of Jesus' birth little more than a charming tale of Christmas card prettiness. Even in the temple there is the shadow of the hatred that will lead to a cross."* Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Share your thinking with the class.

■ Into Discipleship

- Think of the Christmas traditions in your family or church. How long have they been in practice? Who have been the people who make these traditions happen each year? How have these traditions enriched your life?
- Because they did not baptize infants, early Baptists were sometimes accused of child neglect. Most Baptist churches recognize the importance of some sort of ceremony to welcome children into the community of faith. How does your congregation welcome very young children into the life of the church? What is expected of the adults participating in these services?



Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Lord, I Have Seen Thy Salvation” by John D. Cooper, *African American Heritage Hymnal*, #679 (performed by Morgan State University Choir): <https://youtu.be/MhNVyeEhle4?si=H2EHfAk46jxwMr9Z>
- “Messiah Now Has Come” by Nolan Williams, *African American Heritage Hymnal*, #203 (performed by Morgan State University Choir): <https://youtu.be/FdZ6ggimcUY?si=Or0Ox21EL2gigv0L>
- “Nunc Dimittis” by Paul Smith (2019) (performed by VOCES8): <https://youtu.be/qInyQUKMhdA>

Media Option

Learn about the different Christian symbols and their meanings that are often used to turn a Christmas tree to a Chrismon tree.

- <https://www.whychristmas.com/customs/chrismons>
- <https://www.cathedralofhope.org/images/spiritual-life/chrismons-elpc.pdf>

Baptist Connection

“Baby Dedication in the Believers’ Church,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 3 (1984): 63; and Morling College. Adapted from material produced by Arthur G. Patzia. <https://baptistcfm.org.au>

Activity Idea

Luke includes three Temple scenes in chapters 1 and 2: 1:5-25; 2:22-40; 2:41-52. If your class is large enough, divide into three groups and assign a different scene to each group. Encourage each group to identify the characters in their Temple scene and list them. Which elements in the narrative portray obedience to God’s will? What is the emotional tone in each scene? If time permits, share your lists with the whole group.

* Brent Strawn, “The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts,” computer software (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2006), First Sunday after Christmas Year B Gospel Lesson Luke 2:22-40.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B First Sunday After Christmas Day Week of December 31, 2023

Sunday, December 31

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

Monday, January 1 (*New Year’s Day*)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46

Holy Name of Jesus: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21

Tuesday, January 2

Psalm 148; Proverbs 1:1-7; James 3:13-18

Wednesday, January 3

Psalm 110; Proverbs 1:20-33; James 4:1-10

Thursday, January 4

Psalm 110; Proverbs 3:1-12; James 4:11-17

Friday, January 5

Psalm 110; Proverbs 22:1-9; Luke 6:27-31

Saturday, January 6 (*Epiphany of the Lord*)

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

DECISION TIME

finding our place in the gospel

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

—MARK 1:4

Introduction

The Christian hymn “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” originated in Assam, India. While there are alternative traditions over the origins of this hymn, the hymn reminds us that following Jesus is a decision. We may remember the first time we decided to follow Jesus. We also know that following Jesus is a daily decision. In today’s Scripture (Mark 1:4-11), the gospel writer begins his gospel with John the Baptist’s proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, quickly followed by Jesus’ coming from Nazareth to be baptized by John. These beginning events alert the reader that something new is happening. God is doing something new and invites those who hear this message to make decisions.

Lesson Objectives

- To understand what the word *Gospel* originally meant when the book of Mark was written.
- To comprehend John’s message of repentance which prepares us to hear Jesus speak to us.
- To choose actions that can prepare the way for Jesus to speak to others.

Mark 1:4-11 NRSV

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens

torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Into the Scripture

The Gospel of Mark begins with these words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Mark begins his gospel with John the Baptist’s appearing as the promised “messenger,” “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mark 1:3). Mark portrays John as a prophet through his clothing and diet, like Elijah before him (see 2 Kings 1:8). Later in Mark 9:13, John’s identification with Elijah will be made explicit. It is possible that curiosity led the large crowds to go out to John. But John had a powerful message that resonated in Israel, both in the countryside and in Jerusalem (verse 5): “All . . . were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

As John began his ministry, the expectations of the people grew, for the people had been waiting roughly four hundred years for a messiah to deliver them. “The people were filled with expectation . . . questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.”¹ John’s role was not to point people to himself, but to the coming One. John answered, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; . . . I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the

Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7a, 8). As we hear the excitement in John’s voice, we wonder what type of power will be exhibited by this one to come. Mark quickly answers this question as Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John.

When Jesus came up out of the water, the narrator tells us that Jesus saw the heavens torn apart. The Greek verb for “torn open/apart” is *schizo* and occurs again in Mark 15:38.² This implies there is a connection between

“

The people had been waiting roughly four hundred years for a messiah.

Jesus’ baptism and crucifixion. The only other place in the Bible where this expression occurs is in Isaiah 64:1. There, the prophet pleads for God to descend from the heavens and restore a devastated kingdom to “make your name known” (Isaiah 64:2). This reference indicates that God is now doing something.

As the heavens were opened, Jesus was immediately identified as God’s child: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (verse 11). This three-part statement is striking. Each comes from the Old Testament.

- “You are my Son” is from Psalm 2:7, a royal enthronement psalm. Just as God adopted the king in Israel, so Jesus is adopted as God’s son. This is the first of three occurrences in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus is identified as God’s Son. The others are at the Transfiguration (see Mark 9:7) and the Crucifixion (see Mark 15:39).
- The “**beloved**” or “**the one I love**” refers to Abraham’s sacrifice of his son in Genesis 22:2, to King David whom God loves forever (see Psalm 89:28, 33), and to the whole nation of Israel (see Jeremiah 12:7; Hosea 11:1).





- “With you I am well pleased” refers to the description of God’s servant in Isaiah 42:1 and to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40–55, “who brings justice to the nations.”³ Through all these texts we discover themes related to love, covenant, God’s rule, and redemptive suffering. This language is now applied to Jesus. Mark is making a claim that Jesus is the one through whom God’s reign would be established.

With this fast-paced beginning, the author of Mark, who early church tradition says was John Mark from the book of Acts (see Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13) begins his Gospel. Tradition says that Mark wrote down the sermons of Peter. Most scholars believe Mark wrote around AD 64–70 to Roman house churches experiencing persecution. These communities needed to hear a reassuring message that God would work through their witness and faith.

Mark also wrote his Gospel to introduce Jesus to new hearers. For generations, people saw Mark as the less-sophisticated Gospel because of its brevity, lack of birth narratives, and resurrection appearances. But Mark is inviting his hearers to decide what this “good news” or Gospel means and how will they respond. The invitation to decide begins with John the Baptist’s preaching.

Into the Lesson

John is introduced as the messenger who will “prepare the way of the Lord” (verse 3). The reference to Isaiah combines Isaiah 40:3 with Malachi 3:1. In Malachi 3:1, the messenger is to announce the coming of the Lord to His temple. The Isaiah 40 passage speaks of the Israelite exiles’ being led through the wilderness to return home

to Jerusalem. Isaiah 40 encouraged the hope that God would liberate the captives and restore the house of David. Captives did return beginning in 538 BC, but it was not until 140 BC that the people of Judah regained their independence, only to lose it again in 63 BC when Jerusalem fell to the Romans. When Mark’s Gospel opens, the people are again subject to a foreign power—and the great promise of Isaiah 40 had yet to be fulfilled; thus, the people waited for the Messenger of Malachi 3:1.

John the Baptist came preaching a message of baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus. The Jewish people in the first century were familiar with symbolic washing for purity purposes. But only a Gentile who converted to the Jewish faith had to be baptized. And yet, John was asking Jews to submit to baptism. John is exhorting the people to repent, so that people could be prepared for the coming of God’s rule, for the coming of the one after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Like the people who came out into the wilderness to see John the Baptist to be part of the community that was prepared for the one to come, Jesus, we too desire to be prepared to encounter God. We desire to be prepared to hear Jesus speak to us. How we prepare was inferred in John’s baptism—we must repent of our sins and turn in our hearts to God. As New Testament Christians, we practice the baptism Jesus instituted in the Great



John the Baptist came preaching a message of baptism of repentance.

Commission, where we both repent and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior (Matthew 28:19).

The word *repent* in Hebrew and Aramaic simply means to “turn.” But depending upon its context the word can have different meanings. It might mean “turn around” or “turn away from” or “turn toward.”⁴ When John proclaimed his message, it might have been a message for people to “turn around” and look for God in the desert or wilderness because that is traditionally where salvation has come. In the Bible, the wilderness is often a lonely, dangerous place of need and want, of feeling like God has abandoned us. Recall how the Israelites complained to Moses for bringing them into the wilderness. The good news here is when we face difficult situations that cause us to question God’s goodness, we can look square in the face of those wilderness moments and expect paradoxically for salvation to come through that experience.

Repent might mean “turn around” but it also might mean “to turn away from.” John the Baptist asked the people to turn away from a preoccupation with the temple and the Law. He was saying forgiveness was available outside of the religious orders of their day. Repentance for us today might mean turning away from a religious orientation of works of righteousness—to turn away from thinking religious works, whether saying a particular prayer or stiving for social justice, will save us. Repentance today might mean turning away from a religious orientation towards our political leaders, from putting our hopes in the hands of fallen humans no matter where they fall on the political spectrum.

Repentance might mean we are called to turn away from resentment, a holding on to anger over perceived or actual wrongs. In the words of the Big Book of AA, resentments can block us off from the sunlight of the Spirit. Repentance today could also mean to turn away from fear, self-seeking behavior, selfishness, and all those other defects that block us from God’s Spirit.

The third possible meaning of repentance is to “turn toward.” John invited people to turn in eager expectation toward the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Although neither John the Baptist nor the narrator explained what the baptism of the Holy Spirit is, he pointed people to Jesus who would provide that baptism, which invites us to consider how we prepare the way and point people to Jesus.

Into Discipleship

January 6 was the feast of Epiphany, which marks the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Epiphany. Epiphany is a time to focus on the manifestation of Jesus, as Jesus is revealed to all nations. In Mark 1:4-11, Jesus is baptized, but the text is more than a narrative about his baptism. It is a revelatory narrative that invites us to reflect on our baptism and make decisions about our role in the world as a follower of Jesus.

The first revelation in the scripture is when dealing with God, we can expect the unexpected. John did not expect Jesus to be baptized by him. For generations, Christians have pondered why Jesus was baptized. He did not need to repent, to receive the cleansing of the muddy Jordan River. But that is God’s way. With God, expect the unexpected. Who would have expected the Messiah to first appear on the scene asking to be baptized?

When it comes to God, we want to learn to expect the unexpected, to embrace the serendipity of God. One way I have encouraged those I have served as pastor to do this is to look for “God sightings,” a practice of paying attention to God’s activity and presence in the world. I had a recent God sighting when our church sexton said on a Wednesday, in the middle of the day, “There’s two prospective church members at the door—do you want to speak to them?” I was in the middle of something and mumbled that they probably wanted a handout. However, they did not ask for money. They wanted



Resentments can block us off from the sunlight of the Spirit.



information about our church and our ministry. After my conversation with them, I had a brief time of confession and repentance as well as thanksgiving for God's presence in that encounter.

The second revelation in Jesus' baptism is that it reveals his identity and call: "This is My Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (see verse 11). This revelation comes through the baptism because Jesus chose to step down into humanity and decided to be baptized by John. When we decide to be baptized, we are following Jesus' example.

Have you ever thought about the difference between joining a civic club versus the community of Jesus' disciples? When you join a civic club, they hand you a lapel pin, give you a handshake, and have you fill out a membership card. When you join the church we strip you down, hold you under water, half-drown you, and pull you up dripping like a newborn baby. This tells us following Jesus begins in an odd, obedient act. You cannot do baptism to yourself. You must be baptized. In baptism we follow Christ in obedience, we are in solidarity with sinners, learning to receive a gift from God we do not earn or deserve.

Jesus was given a unique role at his baptism. Likewise, we too are given a role. We are baptized into the

body of Christ. The Apostle Paul writes, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13a). As a member of that body, we are invited to proclaim Jesus' message, which in Mark's Gospel is summarized by these words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). One way to live into our baptism is to prepare the way for Jesus to speak to others through love and good deeds.

Jesus' words in verse 15 remind us of verse 1 in Mark's Gospel, where we hear the words "Gospel," "Christ," and "Son of God." We read those words with two thousand years of Christian history and take them for granted. A professed Christian in the first century would have understood "good news," *euangelion* in the Greek, as a "sort of shorthand for the Christian story."⁵ However, an outsider to the faith would have been puzzled. "*Euangelion*, literally 'a bit of good news' or 'a pleasing message,' was the word you would have used in the ancient world as the routine official designation for an important public announcement."⁶ For example, a baby was born in the Emperor's Court, or the army had defeated the enemy. The announcement communicated something delightful occurred, and what happened was probably going to shift the situation in public life. An

outsider to Christian faith would have heard Mark's opening line(s) and realized the author was claiming someone's new reign has begun.

Mark begins his Gospel with John the Baptist and Jesus rushed onto the scene because he wants his hearers to understand that something new that has changed the world has taken place. The question for the reader, for the hearer of this "Good News," is whether we will decide to follow Jesus, whether we will enter "the changed state of affairs that his story is about"⁷ and find our place in the story of the Good News of Jesus, God's anointed, God's Son.

Notes

1. Luke 3:15 (NRSV).
2. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Commentary on Mark 1:4-11," January 7, 2018. *Working Preacher*; Luther Seminary. Accessed July 28, 2023. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-mark-14-11-4>
3. Ronald Kernaghan, "Mark," *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series Volume 2* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 36-37.
4. *Ibid.*, 34.
5. Rowan Williams, *MEETING GOD IN MARK: Reflections for the Season of Lent* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 6.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 24.

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We desire to be prepared to hear Jesus speak to us. How we prepare was inferred in John's baptism—we must repent of our sins and turn in our hearts to God.

Tempted to Leave the Cross: Renewing the Call to Discipleship

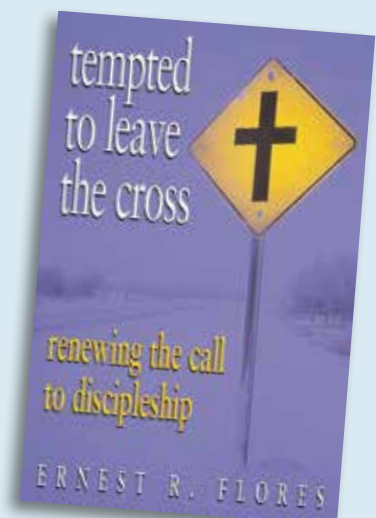
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Closing Prayer

Dear Jesus, the Beloved with whom God is well pleased, it is easy to take for granted your good news that John the Baptist prepared people to hear. It is easy to think we understand what it means to be your follower. It is easy to be complacent and rest on the laurels of yesterday's decisions. Gracious and loving God, remind us that our decision to follow you is daily. Show us this day the many ways we can live for you and point others to your grace and mercy that they too may follow you into the waters of baptism and be baptized by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- When John the Baptist began his ministry, the people of Israel had been waiting for 400 years for the Messiah; when have you waited in expectation?

- Imagine what it was like to hear the opening words of Mark's Gospel for the first time as an outsider to Christian faith; what would you think hearing the words "Jesus, the Christ, meaning anointed one," "Child of God," and "Good News"?

■ Into the Lesson

- When you think of repentance, which image from among "turning around," "turning away from," or "turning toward" resonates with you most?
- What do you need to turn around from in your life? What do you need to turn away from? What or whom do you need to turn toward?

■ Into Discipleship

- Why do you think Jesus asked to be baptized?
- What role do you play in the body of Christ as a baptized believer?
- How do you participate in the reign of God, begun in the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus?

Resources

Song to Consider

- "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," sung by Lydia Walker: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7XHeCZB5KU>
- "Just As I Am," sung by Brothers of the Heart: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZKn-FXrMmg>
- "Pass Me Not," sung by Ann Nesby: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJMNOvGSE4s>



- “If We Just Talk of Thoughts and Prayers” by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDk-dohJ1HQ>

Media Options

- **Poem:** “If We Just Talk of Thoughts and Prayers” by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

If we just talk of thoughts and prayers
And don't live out a faith that dares,
And don't take on the ways of death,
Our thoughts and prayers are fleeting breath.

If we just dream of what could be
And do not build community,
And do not seek to change our ways,
Our dreams of change are false displays.

If we just sing of doing good
And don't walk through our neighborhood
To learn its hope, to ease its pain,
Our talk of good is simply vain.

God, may our prayers and dreams and songs
Lead to a faith that takes on wrongs—
That works for peace and justice, too.
Then will our prayers bring joy to you.

Reflection Question: Does this song invite you to repentance in any way?

- **“Mark’s Gospel—On Stage with Max McLean,”** Dramatic Scripture Reading of Mark 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un3gSYkd0ds>

Activity Ideas

- **Invite** members to share a God sighting from this past week or month.
- **Invite** members to share the story of when they first decided to follow Jesus in Christian discipleship or when they decided to be baptized.

- **Invite** members to share a story of when they decided to follow Jesus, and it cost them something.
- **Invite** members to share their most recent decision to obey Jesus by fulfilling something they knew the Spirit was leading them to do.
- **Research** the various traditions of the story of the origin of the hymn “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus,” including the story of the martyrdom of Nokhseng, a Garo man from Assam, India, as well as the other tradition that attributes the hymn to pastor Simon K. Marak before playing the song for your small group or class.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B First Sunday After the Epiphany Week of January 7, 2024

Sunday, January 7 (*Baptism of the Lord*)

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Monday, January 8

Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; Genesis 17:1-13; Romans 4:1-12

Tuesday, January 9

Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; Exodus 30:22-38; Acts 22:2-16

Wednesday, January 10

Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; Isaiah 41:14-20; John 1:29-34

Thursday, January 11

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Judges 2:6-15;
2 Corinthians 10:1-11

Friday, January 12

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Judges 2:16-23; Acts 13:16-25

Saturday, January 13

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Samuel 2:21-25;
Matthew 25:1-13

FREEDOM

freedom from or freedom for?

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

—1 CORINTHIANS 6:19-20

Introduction

In today's world, many have a superficial view of freedom. Freedom means I get to do what I want, when I want, and how I want. People think, *I am free to indulge in anything if it does not hurt someone else*. Others will tell us they are for freedom and liberty, but these are code words for personal grudges and racial and class resentments. What is freedom and its proper use? We might think our situation is unique, but in our Scripture today Paul writes to the Corinthian church to correct their misunderstanding about the use of their freedom. In doing so he provides guidance to them and to us about our freedom and our relationship to God.

Lesson Objectives

- To understand how the culture of Corinth affected and influenced Corinthian believers.
- To ponder the nature of our freedom in Christ, what we are freed from, and what we are freed for.
- To identify the ways that belonging to Christ may limit one's freedom and give guidance to daily actions to glorify God.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 NRSV

12 "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. 13 "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make

them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, “The two shall be one flesh.” 17 But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18 Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Into the Scripture

What we call 1 Corinthians is really the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. Paul writes, “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons” (1 Corinthians 5:9). This refers to a previous letter lost to history. Some scholars have attempted to identify this “lost letter” with 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1. That passage fits Paul’s reference in 1 Corinthians 5:9; however, some scholars question whether 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 is Pauline. Further, the practice of separating from unbelievers is contradicted by Paul not only in 1 Corinthians 5:9, but also in 7:12-16. It

also was impossible to avoid immoral people in Corinth due to the city’s culture.

Corinth was a Roman Empire colony, the capital city of the province of Achaia, and a major urban center. The Romans conquered Corinth in 146 BCE. Julius Caesar

rebuilt Corinth one hundred years later and resettled it with “eager upwardly mobile freed persons who were unloaded from Rome’s burgeoning population.”¹ A glance at a map of ancient Greece reveals why Julius Caesar rebuilt the city.

Corinth was strategically located 40 miles to the south-southwest of Athens on the Corinthian isthmus. Corinth was a commercial center for both north-south and east-west trade. Trade flowed through Corinth from Athens and the north of Greece to Sparta and the rest of

“

Corinth was a Roman Empire colony and a major urban center.

Peloponnese in the South. Shippers of goods preferred to sail through the calm waters of the Corinthian and Saronic gulfs on the west and east sides of Corinth and portage their goods, including small boats, over the Isthmus, which at its narrowest point was four miles wide.

The mercantile character of Corinth led it to be economically prosperous. This wealth combined with an emigrant population focused on status is the background to many of the Corinthian church conflicts. Whether it was wealthy believers taking their poorer brethren to court (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-11) or eating the best food and getting drunk before everyone arrived to celebrate the love feast of the Lord’s Supper (see 11:17-34), or poorer believers thinking less of themselves than they should (see 1:26-31), at the center of the conflicts was a fascination with status. In short, the immoral culture of Corinth found its way into the church.





Corinth was also religiously diverse. Sailors and others brought their religions with them and planted them in Corinth. There is evidence of Greek and Egyptian temples existing alongside the Roman imperial cult. Lastly, some Jews such as Priscilla and Aquila—most likely expelled from Rome—found Corinth appealing and settled there (see Acts 18:1-2).

In addition to its commercial greatness and religious diversity, Corinth was also known as “sin city.” “The very word *korinthiazesthai*, to live like a Corinthian, had become part of the Greek language, and meant to live with drunken and immoral debauchery.”² Sailors indulging in life and then moving on was one factor for Corinth’s sexual promiscuity. A second factor was the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, located on the hill of the Acropolis above the isthmus. Priestesses attached to that temple were sacred prostitutes. “In the evenings they came down from the Acropolis and plied their trade on the streets of Corinth.”³ Finally, there was a general level of sexual promiscuity in Corinth due to Greek male culture.

Most of the Corinthian believers were Gentiles and former idolaters. Their cultural background contributed to their confusion about Paul’s instruction in the lost letter. A second factor was Paul’s absence. Paul planted the Corinthian church in 50 CE. He stayed with them for 18 months before leaving for Ephesus in the summer of 51 CE. He wrote the “lost letter” sometime in 51 CE, followed by the Corinthians’ reply. The earliest that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to clarify their confusion and to address their questions (see 1 Corinthians 7:1) was in the fall or winter of 53 or 54. We now turn to our Scripture and Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians about the use of their freedom.

Into the Lesson

Our Scripture functions as a pivot. Paul sums up several ideas previously discussed while also previewing matters yet to be considered. Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians by appealing to them to be united in Christ (see 1:10-17). He contrasts the way of worldly wisdom and godly wisdom (see 1:18–2:16). He confronted them over their spiritual immaturity (3:1-15) and reminded them that they were vessels of God’s presence (3:16-17). Paul then warned them not to deceive themselves because of their infatuation with knowledge, but to have the proper perspective (see 3:18–4:21).

After laying this foundation, in chapters 5 and 6, Paul addressed issues that concerned him. At first, it appears that the issue of sexual immorality—“a man is living with his father’s wife” (5:1b)—is unrelated to the lawsuits between believers in 6:1-11. But the touch point between them is community definition.⁴ In chapter 5, Paul argues that the sexual immorality one expects to find outside the faith community is wrongly inside it. In chapter 6, Paul claims disputes between believers should be resolved internally, not publicly in court before unbelievers. When they do this, they cross the border in the other direction, “taking community matters out into the world.”⁵ Both instances reflect a misuse of their freedom.



The immoral culture of Corinth found its way
into the church.

Paul writes, “All things are lawful for me” (6:12a), but these are not his words. He is quoting a Corinthian maxim. A *maxim* is a short, pithy statement—a slogan expressing truth or a rule of conduct. The NRSV’s translation, though, obscures its meaning. The slogan’s assertion is not about law, but about what is permissible. The NIV’s translation—“I have the right to do anything”—is better. Paul does not reject the maxim but qualifies it. He writes, “but not all things are beneficial” (verse 12a) and “but I will not be mastered by anything” (verse 12b, NIV). His qualifications suggest that there are boundaries to what is permissible, to freedom, especially as related to the Corinthians’ behavior in sexual matters. It is possible that Augustine expressed Paul’s sentiment well when he wrote, “Love God and do what you please.” In Augustine’s words, love of God limits one’s freedom.

Paul proceeds to quote a 2 Corinthians maxim: “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” (verse 13a). This slogan reflected a moral indifference to fulfilling the bodily need for food. Such individuals argued for the same moral indifference when it came to sexual desires. This thinking reflected wider Greek culture, where the soul mattered more than the physical human body. After all, “God will destroy both one and the other.”⁶

Paul responded to this thinking with his own maxim in verse 13b, beginning with a disclaimer: “The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” Paul expands on his maxim, writing, “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power” (verse 14). Paul argues that our bodies and what we do with them are important and closely connected to God. The Greek word Paul uses here for “body” is *soma*. He will use this term many times in 1 Corinthians. He used the same term in Romans when he writes, “I appeal to you . . . to present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (12:1). Many versions rightly translate “bodies” as “selves.” Many people think of having a body and a soul. That is Greek thought and Platonic dualism. For the Apostle Paul you are a soul. There is an integration of body and soul, a whole self, which belongs to the Lord.

This issue of belonging becomes the crux of the matter in the rest of our passage. Paul asks a series of questions in 1 Corinthians 6:15-19 to which the Corinthians already knew the answers.

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (verse 15a). Yes, they knew that. “Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute [an illicit sexual partner] becomes one body with her?” (verse 16a). Yes, they knew that. That is from Genesis 2:24—“They become one flesh.” Of course they knew that “anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (verse 17). This issue of belonging is a serious matter. Paul’s word to the Corinthians is that they were to “flee from sexual immorality” (verse 18a, NIV). Such language reminds us of the story of Joseph who fled when confronted with sexual temptation. The Corinthians were not to be proud of a man who was sleeping with his stepmother (see 5:1); they were to flee and mourn such behavior (see 5:2). One is not free to do whatever one wants, and a faith community is not free to celebrate it. There are limits to our freedom.

Into Discipleship

I write this lesson fifteen miles from Independence Hall, where the founders of our country wrote the Declaration of Independence. As Americans, we love our freedoms. We celebrate our freedoms of religion, speech, press, and assembly. School children memorize the greatest of American speeches which began with the words, “Four score and seven years ago . . .” and ended with the words, “that these dead shall not have died in vain—that



There is an integration
of body and soul,
a whole self, which
belongs to the Lord.



this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.”⁷ Those with an honest view of U.S. history realize that new birth of freedom has not been easily or fully won. This weekend, we celebrate not just Dr. King, but all those who gave and give their lives to that goal of expanding freedom to all.

Religious liberty, the right to exercise one’s religion without coercion, is part of our Baptist heritage. Baptist preachers agitated our founding fathers for religious liberty, not just toleration. The oft-quoted phrase “a wall of separation between church and state” was first written by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. Because of our heritage, as Baptists we ought to have a keen interest in promoting religious liberty and speaking out against Christian nationalism.

When we gather for civil holidays such as MLK Jr. Day, Memorial Day, or Fourth of July, I often ponder about the nature of freedom. Do we gather to give thanks for what we are free *from* or free *for*? I think we most often think in terms of freedom *from*. Freedom from: the British, the tyranny of slavery, the Nazis, terrorists, and government intrusion. We focus little on the use of our freedom—our freedom *for*. Our view of freedom can be superficial. We are free to do what we want when we want and how we want. I am free to indulge in anything if it does not hurt anyone else. George A. Mason says, “A freedom that boasts in having no boundaries is license rather than freedom; and that kind of freedom will collapse on itself.”⁸

Our situation is not that different from the Corinthian church. Some thought their freedom in Christ meant they were free from all constraints. “Everything is permissible.” Paul reminded them there are qualifications to their freedom; “not everything is beneficial.” The Corinthians were fond of saying that “every sin that a person commits is outside the body.”⁹ Their argument was, “If sin does not affect the body—that very body that is the Lord’s—then whatever sin one does has no bearing on the body’s commitment to the Lord.”¹⁰ However, others at Corinth said that “whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body,”¹¹ meaning it is a private affair and “not a concern for the community.”¹²

In response, Paul asks one last “Do you not know?” question: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). This image is straight from the slave market. There slaves were regularly bought and sold. Paul’s point is that when they were slaves, they “ended up with different lords and masters.”¹³

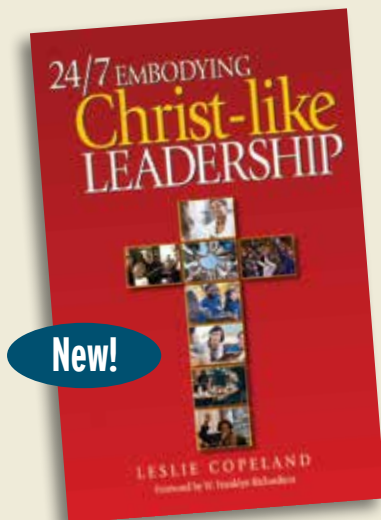
Paul’s message to the Corinthians and to us is to remember that we have been bought. He is not interested to whom the payment was made. The point is we have been bought and have a new master—the LORD. So, we are free from the tyranny of sin, but our freedom is for the LORD; therefore, go and glorify God in your body, in your life, in your church.

Notes

1. J. Paul Sampley, "1 Corinthians," *New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume X. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 775.
2. William Barclay, "Introduction to the Letters to the Corinthians," *The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to the Corinthians* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.
3. Ibid.
4. J. Paul Sampley, 844.
5. Ibid., 853.
6. Commentators debate whether "God will destroy both one and the other" is part of the Corinthians slogan or is Paul's qualification or correction to their maxim. There are arguments for both positions.
7. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.
8. George A. Mason, "Freedom From: Fighting Against Religious Mastery," September 17, 2006, Willshire Baptist Church, Dallas, TX. <https://bjconline.org/freedom-from-fighting-against-religious-mastery/>
9. 1 Corinthians 6:18b (NRSV)
10. J. Paul Sampley, 864.
11. 1 Corinthians 6:18 (NIV)
12. J. Paul Sampley, 864.
13. Ibid.

“

Go and glorify God in your body, in your life,
in your church.



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Closing Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks for the freedom we experience in Christ. We know that if we continue in your word, we are your followers, and then and only then we will know the truth. And the truth, you, the way, the truth, and life will set us free—not only will we be free from sin, but we will also be free to love and do good works, which you have prepared in advance for us to do. So, thank you, LORD, for our freedom! Always remind us that we belong to you, and may we use our freedom each day to bring you praise and glory. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- The culture of Corinth (concern with status, religious pluralism, sexual promiscuity) contributed to the Corinthians' misunderstanding of Paul's first letter to them. What characteristics of our culture may lead us to misunderstand the Bible, including Paul's epistles today?

- The Church in Corinth experienced division due to different status claims. What contributes to divisions and conflicts in churches today?

■ Into the Lesson

- What are examples of the world's being brought into the church today? What are examples of the church's taking community matters out into the world?
- What does Paul mean by "everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial"?
- What do you think of the idea that you are not a separate body and soul, but they are integrated—a whole self?
- How might our freedom be limited (for example, Augustine said, "Love God and do what you please.")?

■ Into Discipleship

- When you think of freedom, do you think in terms of freedom from or freedom for?
- How can we use our freedom so others can experience freedom?
- How does recognizing our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, which have been bought through Christ's death, affect your daily decisions and actions? How can we glorify God in our bodies?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- "We Shall Overcome," sung by Morehouse College Glee Club (spiritual arranged by Wendell P. Whalum): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aor6-DkzBJ0>



SPEAK THE
Truth

- “The Church’s One Foundation,” sung by Christ Church Bellingham: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKRmncbUMps>
- “Take My Life and Let It Be,” the official lyric video presented by Reawaken Hymns: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3gWwGDGgVA>

Media Options

- We celebrate **Martin Luther King Jr. Day** tomorrow. As an introduction to the theme of freedom, listen to one of Dr. King’s speeches together or send a link to one of his speeches to your class to listen to before class.
 - “I Have a Dream”: <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>
 - “I Have Been to the Mountaintop”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixfwGLxRJu8>
 - “Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJhgXKGIUk>
- Map showing the location of Corinth:
 - https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/-AeKwUd9J1_E/W5k5c39y_sI/AAAAAAAAABYVc/9vXpEeubmvom_JDMbGO0fu1Tb8t2SkIOQCHMYCw/corinth-map2%255B1%255D?imgmax=1600

Baptist Connection

- **Learn more about Religious Liberty** and the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty
 - <https://bjconline.org/>
 - <https://bjconline.org/christiannationalism/>

Activity Ideas

- **Discuss one of the following quotes** from the lesson with your group.
 - “Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.”
—Attributed to St. Augustine
 - “A freedom that boasts in having no boundaries is license rather than freedom; and that kind of freedom will collapse on itself.”
—Attributed to George A. Mason

- **Share a few of the opening lines of the following Dr. King Speech** and ask participants to guess which famous speech it is from.

“Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

“But 100 years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. And so we’ve come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check.

“When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—yes, Black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

“It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds. But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we’ve come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”*

*These are the opening paragraphs of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

- **Ask**, “What do you think are the reasons for why we never hear this part of his famous speech?”

Devotional Scriptures Year B Second Sunday After the Epiphany Week of January 14, 2024

Sunday, January 14

1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20); Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18;
1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Monday, January 15

Psalm 86; 1 Samuel 9:27-10:8; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Tuesday, January 16

Psalm 86; 1 Samuel 15:10-31; Acts 5:1-11

Wednesday, January 17

Psalm 86; Genesis 16:1-14; Luke 18:15-17

Thursday, January 18

Psalm 62:5-12; Jeremiah 19:1-15; Revelation 18:11-20

Friday, January 19

Psalm 62:5-12; Jeremiah 20:7-13; 2 Peter 3:1-7

Saturday, January 20

Psalm 62:5-12; Jeremiah 20:14-18; Luke 10:13-16

- Paul Tillich wrote a book called *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* in which he examines the relationship between these fundamental concepts in the mutual relations of people. Discuss their relationships. How does love limit power? What is the purpose of power? How does justice influence the practice of love?
- Lead an inductive Bible study exploring the various maxims of the Corinthians and Paul's qualification of them.
 - What does it mean that all things are permissible, but not all are beneficial?
 - What does it mean to not be dominated by anything?
 - What and for whom is our body meant for?
 - How does the resurrection of Jesus impact our understanding of the purpose of our bodies?
 - What does it mean that we are member of Christ?
 - What does it mean to be united to the LORD and become one spirit with him?
 - What is the relationship between sin and community?
 - What are ways you can glorify God in your life daily?

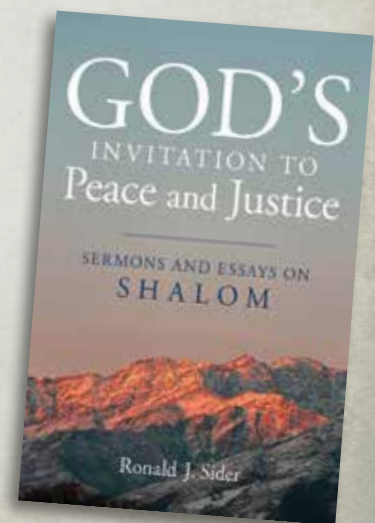
God's Invitation to Peace and Justice: Sermons and Essays on Shalom

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SOVEREIGNTY

the changing mind of God

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

—JONAH 3:10

Introduction

Jonah's ministry to the Ninevites is an unparalleled success. Strutting into the middle of the city, he proclaims that God's judgment is on the metropolis, and they respond in a somewhat surprising way—they repent. Not one to be outdone, God also acts in a surprising way—God changes God's mind. What is revealed is a God who is more malleable and connected to our lives than we might have thought possible.

Lesson Objectives

- To develop an understanding of Jonah's ministry.
- To gain a greater understanding of the power of prayer.
- To reflect on what Jonah's story tells us about God's nature.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 NRSV

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. . . . 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Into the Scripture

The book of Jonah belongs to the category of Minor Prophets within the Hebrew Bible. The term *minor* does not mean that these books are unimportant; rather it refers to the lengths of the books themselves. They tend to be short. While Jonah is mentioned in a list of prophets in 2 Kings 14:25—which would place him as living during the seventh century BCE—most scholars believe the book was written post-Exile several centuries later. Jonah’s example of God’s responding to prayer and repentance is still used today in Jewish Yom Kippur services, which emphasize the need to repent of past misdeeds and receive God’s mercy.

Jonah and the Great Fish

Perhaps the best-known portion of Jonah concerns his being swallowed by what is commonly referred to as a whale and being spit out three days later. Doubtlessly, its popularity is because the imagery is unique, and I remember being enchanted by the story as a child in Sunday school, but Christians also found resonance with Jesus’ story of the resurrection. Both he and Jonah are isolated from the earthly realm for three days and then



walk again on dry land. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the whale in question was not really a whale at all. The Hebrew text calls the creature a *dag gadol* or “great fish.” The first translator of the Bible into English that we can credit with that task, William Tyndale, keeps this translation—he calls it

a “greate fyshe.” Somewhere along the way, through its translation into Greek and then into Latin, the translation “whale” became common.

Jonah and Nineveh

The first part of the book of Jonah details his hesitance to become a prophet. Fleeing from God’s call, he boards a boat headed in the opposite direction of Nineveh. The second part sees Jonah cajoled—by that great fish—into accepting his call and journeying to the “exceedingly large city” (verse 3) mentioned in our text.



Jonah rebukes God’s mercy and becomes angry.

It was indeed large—it held the title “most populous city in the world” for a few decades—and was capital of the Assyrian Empire, holding vast power and wealth during Jonah’s time. As our text explains, Jonah’s mission is successful, but he does not see it that way. Jonah rebukes God’s mercy and becomes angry—the text quotes him as saying that he was “angry enough to die” (Jonah 4:9b). Indeed, earlier he asked God to take his life: “Please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3). One must wonder why Jonah was selected for this particular task, seeing as he cares very little for the lives of the Ninevites. The book ends on a cliffhanger of sorts—Jonah is angry, has just lost a shade plant that God caused to grow, and is rebuked by God for his cold heart. We do not know what became of Jonah after that.

Into the Lesson

Nineveh’s status as the center of the ancient world could not save it from being condemned by God. Jonah 1:2 begins with a simple command: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me” (NIV). While Jonah’s text is content not to dwell on the specific sins of Nineveh, some clues appear in another prophetic text—Nahum. In Nahum 3:1 (NET), God lays out the case more fully: “Woe to the city guilty of bloodshed! She is full of lies; she is filled with plunder; she has hoarded her spoil!” Nahum 3:4 adds “sorcery” to the list of perceived sins.

Sworn Enemies

Whatever the case may be, Nineveh is a foil for the Israelites and their sworn enemy. Many of the prophets and historical accounts are written in a time of chaos as Israel foresees Assyria's growing might. One story recounts how Sennacherib's (king of Assyria's) campaign against the Israelites is turned back at the gates of Jerusalem by a miracle:

That very night the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh (2 Kings 19:35-36).

However, in the end, the Assyrian Empire could not be held back. Second Kings 18:11-12 relates this:

The king of Assyria carried the Israelites away to Assyria, settled them in Halah, on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD their God but transgressed His covenant—all that Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded; they neither listened nor obeyed.

This event, known as the Assyrian captivity, was more brutal than the Babylonian captivity that would befall Judah. The tribes were scattered and assimilated into the Assyrian culture—an act of cultural genocide. What is most difficult to accept is that Assyria's



conquering of Israel is portrayed as God's righteous punishment for disobedience. I tend to view these texts as trying to make sense out of a calamity—where was God? Their answer is that God was punishing them—an answer that we are free to accept or reject.

Swift Repentance

All that is to say that Jonah had good reasons to not be delighted by the news that God would forgive the Ninevites. They were the most feared enemies of Israel, God's chosen people. And yet when they repent, putting on sackcloth and ashes, God does forgive them. Jonah recounts how the king issues a decree that "human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands" (Jonah 3:8). This is done with the hope that "God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (Jonah 3:9b).

What we see here is that God is responsive to our prayers. Even the worst enemies of God's chosen people find forgiveness when they repent—how much more so is forgiveness available for those who amend their ways. There are plenty of reasons why we forestall repentance. Perhaps we feel that we are not doing anything wrong—we may require a Jonah to tell us. What is most



The Assyrian captivity was more brutal than the Babylonian captivity.

important is that when faced with our wrongdoing, we seek to do better and ask God to help us.

Into Discipleship

While Jonah is a short book, it presents us with a unique viewpoint on God. In Jonah, God is influenced by prayers, and we get one of the more tantalizing quotes in the Bible: “God changed [God’s] mind” (Jonah 3:10a). Such a statement runs counter to viewpoints expressed elsewhere in Scripture. Consider Numbers 23:19 and its statement about God’s fundamental unchangeability, often referred to in theology as immutability:

God is not a human being, that he should lie,
or a mortal, that he should change his mind.
Has he promised, and will he not do it?
Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

And, yet, that is precisely what God does! God says that God will destroy Nineveh and then decides not to, being influenced by the people and animals that would perish.

Fundamentally Merciful

Jonah says that the reason that he was afraid to do God’s will is because God is fundamentally merciful: “That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2b). God cares about people so much that God is willing to abandon judgment in favor of mercy.

What we have here is a tension between God’s eternal, immutable nature and God’s irrevocable love for humanity. In the story of Jonah, God’s love of people wins out, and we can count on that to still be true today. God even names the animals as a particular concern: “Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jonah 4:11). Jesus points to God’s providential care for the animals and plants as a call to trust that God will meet all our needs without worrying, since human beings are more important to God than animals (see Matthew 6:26-27). In the same way, if God cared about Nineveh—its people and its animals—then surely God cares about us, our cities, our societies, our towns, and neighborhoods.



We must work to craft
a society that reflects
God’s values.

Lovingly Challenged

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in *God in Search of Man* that the story of the Bible is not one of people looking for God, but of God looking for us. This God has made us as partners in creation, and we cannot be so easily cast aside by this God. Seeking connections, God continues to reach out to us. When we look at this simple fact—our individual and corporate lives matter to God—it ought to challenge our ethics. Are we creating a world in which all lives are valued and celebrated?

Unfortunately, we have not crafted such a society. According to the Brookings Institution, the median white household possesses 6.9 times the wealth of the median black household.¹ Racial disparities in policing mean that while Black Americans make up 13 percent of the population, they account for 27 percent of those fatally shot by police.² God’s love means that we must work to craft a society that reflects God’s values and rejects white supremacy and racism. In this story, we are Nineveh, and the prophets among us pushing us for racial justice are calling us to repentance. What will we do? How will we respond? The good news is that we know that God can change God’s mind, if we are willing to stop everything and change our ways. God’s mercy knows no bounds.

Notes

1. [https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-black-white-wealth-gap-left-black-households-more-vulnerable/#:~:text=Wealth%20Inequality%20Preceding%20COVID%2D19&text=It%20is%20worth%20noting%20that,households%20\(%24142%2C500%3B%20SCF](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-black-white-wealth-gap-left-black-households-more-vulnerable/#:~:text=Wealth%20Inequality%20Preceding%20COVID%2D19&text=It%20is%20worth%20noting%20that,households%20(%24142%2C500%3B%20SCF)
2. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/t-black-people-are-still-killed-police-higher-rate-groups-rcna17169>

Closing Prayer

Loving God, we know that you abound in mercy and that you are willing to change your mind in the face of repentance. Call us to repentance for those sins that we have committed and help us to change our world so that it is more in line with your care for all creation. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- What parts of Jonah’s life resonate with you—are you fleeing a call from God, or have you faced anger and resentment in your faith life?
- Did you grow up hearing about Jonah and whale?
- Does it mean anything that this [whale] is an incorrect translation?

■ Into the Lesson

- What does it mean that God also cared for Israel’s enemies?

- What do you think of the Bible’s explanation that the Assyrian conquest of Israel was a judgment from God?

■ Into Discipleship

- Have you ever heard that God does not change God’s mind?
- How does Jonah challenge that conception?
- Of what should we repent and how can we do so?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale,” a hymn by Jaroslav Vajda and Carl Schalk; Voice and piano by Adam Kukuk (performed by Ashland UCC): <https://youtu.be/iDjs7CFpoGo?si=3FLyHeZsQvhkDX4F>
- “Jonah,” a Spiritual performed by Purdue University Choir: <https://youtu.be/7tdAh8o80OY?si=0LJSa9sv7rxgOiYD>
- “Jonah” by Rollo Dilworth and performed by NYSSSA Boys Choir: <https://youtu.be/xKGYVITiWGY?si=xmeAyml9vR92WLyT>

Media Options

Share the videos of these two “Jonah” selections as an opening or closing to your session.

- “Jonah and the Whale,” performed camp meeting style by Buddy Greene with harmonica: https://youtu.be/_5uwJbwQ4GI?si=AVwn4HJKsw1_V6lZ
- “Jonah Was a Prophet,” performed by VeggieTales: <https://youtu.be/2qLhAdA5ZXI?si=JbX58FHuYdEYnepr>



- **Poem:** “Jonah’s Fish” by Laura Wang (*The Christian Century*, April 21, 2019)

I was hungry, and he thrashed
 like a hurt turtle, paddling nowhere
 on his sprawling, knobby joints.
 Between the endless ropes of kelp
 and the breath-bubbles spiraling
 about his head, I didn’t see
 his eyes rolling to whiteness,
 the matted fur of head, chest, limbs
 that would have signaled: man,
 earth-born scourge of the seas,
 now overthrown and scallop-pale
 with cold. I swallowed him whole.
 First he bellowed; later, voice ragged,
 his whimpers bounced off my bones,
 rattled them like bars. Then, slowly,
 a vibration as his breath circled
 my womb’s vault, warming my throat.
 He chanted; I admit I listened
 (he called me Hades—I decided
 to let that go). And then he said a thing
 that sent me careening through the depths
 for terror: that it was *he* who’d cast him off,
 wrapped his hard heart in a blanket
 of waves. What fearful creature
 was I carrying? Would I be stricken
 for harboring him, stripped of my fins
 and forced to trawl the sand?
 Into the lightless waters where I fled
he spoke, and spoke to *me*.
 It was enough
 to turn my gut: I sped to shore,
 spit him up there. Since then, fullness
 hasn’t felt quite the same.

Activity Ideas

- Draw a picture of a “great fish” on a sheet of paper or a marker board. Imagine yourself in the fish, waiting to emerge. What steps can you take to be ready to do God’s will when you exit? Write your commitments down next to the fish.

- Use the University of Richmond’s interactive Mapping Inequality website to locate a Home Owners Loan Corporation map from the 1930s of a city near you. The map is color-coded and shows how Black families were systematically robbed of wealth through the denial of loans in their neighborhoods, a process called redlining. Look for the red on the map. What do you think we have to repent for? How can we craft a better society?

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Week of January 21, 2024

Sunday, January 21

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Monday, January 22

Psalm 46; Genesis 12:1-9; 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Tuesday, January 23

Psalm 46; Genesis 45:25–46:7; Acts 5:33-42

Wednesday, January 24

Psalm 46; Proverbs 8:1-21; Mark 3:13-19a

Thursday, January 25

Psalm 111; Deuteronomy 3:23-29; Romans 9:6-18

Friday, January 26

Psalm 111; Deuteronomy 12:28-32; Revelation 2:12-17

Saturday, January 27

Psalm 111; Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Matthew 8:28–9:1

LOVE

unity within diversity

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

—1 CORINTHIANS 8:1

Introduction

In a March 2022 survey, 42 percent of pastors reported they considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year.¹ More than half said this was due to the stress of the job. Thirty-eight percent named “current political divisions” as a reason for stepping away. Navigating differences of opinions and conflict is nothing new for pastors or congregations. These are inherent in any community, including the church. The church in Corinth faced conflict. The apostle Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians was an exhortation for unity that respected differences. He urged the Corinthians to practice humility and to care for each other in love. He invited them to have the mind of Christ to love. Paul’s words spoke to them, and his words speak to us today.

Lesson Objectives

- To understand the causes of the divisions at the church in Corinth.
- To observe Paul’s use of the two-way rhetorical tradition, which invites believers to balance their assertion of knowledge with the call to be gracious and kind.
- To identify situations that call us to set aside our freedom and rights in the interests of building others up in love.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 NRSV

1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3 but anyone who loves God is known by him. 4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus

Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. 7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Into the Scripture

First Corinthians has been described as a case study of Christian community, not because the Corinthians were perfectly united but because they were divisive with one another.² Paul began his epistle to the Corinthians with a plea: “Now I appeal to you . . . that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Chloe’s people had reported to Paul there were quarrels and divisions within

the Corinthian church. Some followed Paul, others Apollos, and still others Cephas (see 1:12). The sociohistorical and cultural background of the Corinthians helps us understand these divisions.

Corinth was a prosperous commercial city. When Paul wrote

to the Corinthians in the early fifties CE, Corinth had been a Roman colony for about a century. Julius Caesar had populated the colony with “eager upwardly mobile freed persons.”³ One ancient writer described the people of Corinth as lacking charm and grace. He also stated that they did not possess great concern for the

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Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians was an exhortation for unity that respected differences.

less fortunate.⁴ People in Corinth were concerned with status. When Paul wrote to them, “Consider your own call . . . not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth,”⁵ he reflected their fascination with status. But it was not just wealth that determined status and created divisions.

The pursuit of knowledge also created divisions. “Wisdom and its cultured speech earned status in the culture of Paul’s time.”⁶ Philosophers and teachers





were given power and status based on their presumed knowledge. Those skilled in rhetoric could exploit this dynamic for their own selfish ends. In the Corinthian church, those of higher status would have preferred a rhetorically skilled speaker like Apollos over Paul, who was a manual laborer. This is why Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he did not come to them with “wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”⁷

Paul wanted the Corinthians’ faith to rest not on worldly wisdom, but on God’s power. He warned them to have an accurate self-assessment. “Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”⁸ This passage has sometimes been used to encourage Christians to be anti-science, but that is not its purpose.

Paul is making use of a common rhetorical device, the rival two-way tradition, in which “two rival and opposing ways are depicted, and the auditors are called to take the one and avoid the other.”⁹ An example of this is Paul’s comparison between eloquent or human wisdom and the Cross of Christ and its power (see 1:17; 2:1-5). A second example is the contrast between God’s “secret and hidden” wisdom versus the wisdom of this age (see 2:6-16).¹⁰ A third example is Paul’s dividing people into two groups, such as the spiritual versus the unspiritual (see 2:14-15), or spiritual versus people of the flesh (see 3:1-5).

Because of their divisions, rooted in their quest for status via wealth and knowledge, Paul lamented that the Corinthians were still “infants in Christ,” “unspiritual,” and “of the flesh.”¹¹ Paul longed for the Corinthians

to have right relationships with each other. He desired them to be united in one purpose and mind (1:10). While wisdom itself does not seem to be the cause for the specific problems addressed by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, status is. Paul’s linking of status and wisdom provides a “context for him to deal with status claims throughout the letter,”¹² including the claims made around the then-cultural, hot-button topic of eating meat sacrificed to idols as found in our Scripture.

Into the Lesson

The Corinthians had written a letter to Paul asking him questions about eating food sacrificed to idols. They had different opinions about the matter. Corinth had many pagan temples that practiced animal sacrifice. A portion of the animal would be burned on the altar as an offering to the deity. Some of the meat would be eaten at a festive, social cultic meal. The rest of the meat was sold at the market to the public. The possibility of encountering this meat by purchasing it or at an unbelieving friend’s home raised the question of how one lives in that culture and continues to be set apart for God.

Paul responded to the Corinthians’ question first by clarifying “what believers think they know and what they should know.”¹³ Second, he warned them that not



Paul lamented that the Corinthians were still “infants in Christ,” “unspiritual,” and “of the flesh.”

everyone had the same knowledge and provided instructions how those with that knowledge ought to relate to those without it.

Paul began his response by repeating a slogan that some Corinthians held. “All of us possess knowledge,” meaning all of us know that eating meat sacrificed to idols is not a problem. This group was asserting their freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols. The problem was their claim was universal. They did not allow for diversity of viewpoints. Not everyone in Corinth possessed this knowledge (verse 7). Those who possessed this knowledge and freedom to eat food offered to idols probably looked down on those who did not exercise such freedom. Using their knowledge as a status marker was the problem.

As in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul did not reject the Corinthians’ position, but he qualified it and provided a theological basis for his qualification. He responded with his own maxim: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1b). Paul previously warned that some in Corinth were arrogant about their own knowledge.¹⁴ Paul’s maxim here was another warning. Further, in the rival two-way tradition, Paul set such knowledge against love. Will they follow the way of knowledge or love? Paul was not setting up love and faith over knowledge. Paul wanted the Corinthians’ knowledge to function correctly—to function in a loving, not self-serving, fashion.

In verse 2, Paul relayed that those who claim such knowledge have things backwards: “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.” For Paul, one’s knowledge is not the starting point for self-understanding, ethical decision making, and right relationship with others. The correct starting point is loving God and being known by God (verse 3). This is what the Corinthians should know, not in an intellectual sense, but as a lived experience.

Having offered his qualification to the Corinthians’ slogan and taught his theological principle, Paul returned to the question of meat and idols. He laid out two proverbs that believers should know. He wrote, “We know that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’” and that “there is no God but one” (verse 4). Paul addressed the issue of eating meat by dismissing the idea of idols. Second, there is only one God: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Paul was not just making a theological point. Paul was saying that life is lived in relation to that deity. As a friend said

to me, “The only reason I find theology worth pursuing is theology will impact behavior if it is applied.” Paul was saying that we relate to the world as those who belong to this one God, “the Father . . . for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, . . . through whom we exist.”¹⁵

But not everyone had this knowledge about idols. Some believers still felt that idols had some power and to eat meat sacrificed to them was to worship those idols. In verses 7-13, Paul provided instructions for community relationships due to this diversity. Paul broadened the discussion to all food by quoting another proverb: “Food will not bring us close to God” (verse 8a). It did not matter what they ate (verse 8); what mattered was for the liberty of those who ate the idol meat to not become a stumbling block to those with a “weaker” conscience (verse 9). Paul wrote that those without this freedom may see those with the freedom eating in the temple of an idol. They may be encouraged to also eat food sacrificed to idols, which would violate their consciences (verse 10). The verb translated “encouraged” is *oikodeo-meo*.¹⁶ The term means “to be built up.” Here, it means to be built up wrongly, for their conscience is wounded (verse 12). Paul said that wounding them was a sin not only against a fellow believer, but also against Christ.

The image of being wrongly built up returns us to Paul’s opening slogan: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” “Love, properly functioning, will not



Paul previously warned that some in Corinth were arrogant about their own knowledge.



encourage someone to do what is not appropriate, so improper and therefore, false building up cannot be the work of love.”¹⁷ The work of love is not to indiscriminately exercise one’s freedom without regard for others. The work of love is to consider others. Therefore, Paul wrote that he would never eat meat if it would cause a weaker brother or sister to fall (verse 13).

Into Discipleship

Paul used the specific question about idol meat as an opportunity to teach proper interrelationships within the church. He also transformed the question into a metaphor of the proper attitude for all of life. Paul warned those with “greater knowledge” to not be proud about their knowledge and freedom. What mattered was not what they knew but being known by God. Paul also taught them the proper relationship between knowledge and love. As he wrote in a few chapters, one’s having knowledge without love means that one is nothing (see 13:2). When knowledge is carried away with itself, is used to enhance one’s own status, causes others to stumble, or becomes more important than love, that knowledge is nothing. Instead of insisting on one’s own liberty, Paul wrote that he himself would limit his freedom out of love to fellow believers.

We may wonder how this passage can be applied today. I want to begin by stating one way this passage should not be applied. I grew up in a fundamentalist

sub-culture of American Christianity. I often heard this passage used to tell teenage girls not to wear certain clothes lest they cause their brothers to stumble and fall. This line of purity culture reasoning was and is wrong. It damages boys and girls, and men and women. On its surface, it would seem to align with Paul’s message. But when one looks at the social dynamics of power and gender, one realizes it is a misapplication. Such thinking communicated that boys were not responsible for their behavior. Such thinking makes girls the responsible party. It is not very far from this thinking to the destructive thought of, “Well, if she wasn’t wearing . . . that wouldn’t have happened.” As Christians, we are called to reject this interpretation that upholds patriarchy and oppression and hurts not just women but men as well.

Having said this, how do we apply this text to our lives? I think of a song by my favorite songwriter, David Wilcox. The song’s title is “Piece of Me.” In the song, he paints the picture of Christians on the left and the right getting ready to fight. “They’re fightin’ like the devil for the Prince of Peace.” The problem is they are fighting each other to be right. In these situations, Christians often tear each other down for the sake of proving a point. Churches split. The witness of Christ suffers. In the words of David Wilcox, “The body of Christ is torn limb from limb.”

Paul wrote, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” When we find ourselves disagreeing with others, we will do well to remember Paul’s words. More than once I

have seen those who have arrived at what they believe is a superior position to dismiss and treat others with disdain. Instead of such behavior, we are called to use our knowledge for the building up of our fellow believers.

At the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul appealed to them that they would “be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1:10). Later, he speaks of having the “mind of Christ.” In another of the authentic Pauline epistles we read these words: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”¹⁸ Our passage illustrates how that mindset is lived in community. May we seek to apply it to our lives. May we honor individuality and diversity. May we possess an accurate self-assessment. Finally, may we care for our fellow believers and leave no one out as we build each other up in love.

Notes

1. <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>
2. J. Paul Sampley, “1 Corinthians,” *New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume X. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 788.
3. J. Paul Sampley, 775.
4. Ibid.
5. 1 Corinthians 1:26 (NRSV)
6. J. Paul Sampley, 812.
7. 1 Corinthians 2:4 (NIV)
8. 1 Corinthians 3:18-19a (NRSV)
9. J. Paul Sampley, 802.
10. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 is an elaboration of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.
11. 1 Corinthians 3:1-5.
12. J. Paul Sampley, 802.
13. J. Paul Sampley, 893.
14. 1 Corinthians 1:29, 31; 3:21; 4:6-7, 18-19; 5:2, 6
15. 1 Corinthians 8:6 (NRSV) (See also 1 Corinthians 3:21-23; 6:19-20)
16. J. Paul Sampley, 900.
17. Ibid.
18. Philippians 2:4-5 (NRSV)

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May we care for our fellow believers and leave no one out as we build each other up in love.

#InThisTogether: Ministry in Times of Crisis

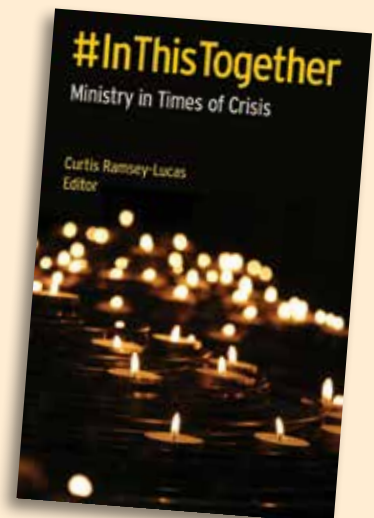
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Closing Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the example of your Son, Jesus Christ, who though rich for our sake became poor. We thank you for the words of the Apostle Paul which call us to build up one another in love. Lord, forgive us when we allow our pursuit of status to blind us from seeing opportunities to care for fellow believers. Remind us that we are not “lone ranger” Jesus followers but members of Christ’s Church, Christ’s body. We belong to you, to Christ, and to each other. May that belonging determine our actions every day. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- What are some reasons (perhaps serious or not serious) you have heard that led to a church split, conflict, or exodus of members from a church?
- The Corinthians sought status through wealth and wisdom. What are ways people seek status today?

■ Into the Lesson

- Eating idol meat raised the question of how to live in a culture and continue to be set apart for God. What are some modern-day parallels that illustrate the same tension?
- What is an example of something you may refrain from doing for the sake of someone with a “weaker conscience”?

■ Into Discipleship

- What steps can a church take to create a culture of healthy communication and conflict resolution?
- What does it mean to have the mind of Christ?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Piece of Me” by David Wilcox: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50xZ9TINQEc>
- “Everything I Think I Know, I Think” by David Wilcox: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul7blV8RwO8>
- “They’ll Know We are Christians by Our Love” by Jars of Clay: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CI4qefRAi4>

Media Options

- One of the challenges in Corinth was some individuals had an inflated view of themselves and their knowledge. In essence they lacked humility.



View the video on Cultural Humility and consider its intersection with the Apostle Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Mbu8bvKb_U

■ **Poem:** “Piece of Me” by David Wilcox.

You’ve never seen a rumble Like the fight tonight
 We got the Christians on the left
 We got the Christians on the right
 See ’em coming at each other
 Got the bloody truth in their teeth
 They’re fightin’ like the devil For the prince of peace

You want a piece of me
 Take it out back. Get a piece of me
 Snip and you snap to cut a piece of me
 What you lack is just the—peace of me

Step right up See ’em face their death
 Back in the Roman coliseum
 We used to see ’em all confess
 Yeah, it used to be the lions Had the pointy teeth
 Now we throw ’em to the Christians
 For a little comic relief

There’s only one message
 That’s gettin across
 As they’re all screaming at each other
 That their souls are lost
 Yeah, the lights go dim, and the fight gets grim
 We see the body of Christ Torn limb from limb

There’s only one message
 That’s gettin across
 As they’re all screaming at each other
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 Yeah, the lights go dim, and the fight gets grim
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Activity Ideas

- **Invite** members to share their history with this text. When have they studied it? When have they heard it preached? What was the lesson or point of application?
- **Ask** members to identify issues of conflict within the culture. How do those with different knowledge claims relate to one another?

■ **Discuss** these questions:

1. What does Paul mean when he writes “knowledge puffs up”?
2. Does Paul mean for the Corinthians not to pursue knowledge, or is the issue the use of one’s knowledge in relationship to others?
3. How does recognizing there is one God whom we belong to inform our actions?
4. What are ways to balance our freedom and love in a diverse community?

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

Week of January 28, 2024

Sunday, January 28

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Monday, January 29

Psalm 35:1-10; Numbers 22:1-21; Acts 21:17-26

Tuesday, January 30

Psalm 35:1-10; Numbers 22:22-28; 1 Corinthians 7:32-40

Wednesday, January 31

Psalm 35:1-10; Jeremiah 29:1-14; Mark 5:1-20

Thursday, February 1

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Proverbs 12:10-21; Galatians 5:2-15

Friday, February 2

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Job 36:1-23; 1 Corinthians 9:1-16
Presentation of the Lord: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84 or
 Psalm 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

Saturday, February 3

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Isaiah 46:1-13; Matthew 12:9-14

RESTORATION

learning to wait

But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and
not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

—ISAIAH 40:31

Introduction

Frequently life is a tug-of-war between hurry and wait. We hurry to the airport, and then we wait and wait for our flight to be called. We hurry to the counter to place our order and wait for it to be filled. We hurry to the clinic to keep an appointment and wait for our name to be called. Most of us do not like to wait. Have you ever imagined what it would be like living in exile in another country and waiting for the day you would be allowed to return to your homeland? That was the Israelites' situation. For almost five decades the Israelites endured the daily state of servitude. Powerless against their captors, they were tired of waiting. Weariness, of course, is not unique to the Israelites. What about you? Are you tired of waiting?

Lesson Objectives

- To analyze the setting of Isaiah's oracle.
- To examine the poet's writing technique.
- To identify ways to personally apply Isaiah's encouragement.

Isaiah 40:21-31 NRSV

21 Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; 23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. 25 To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 26 Lift up your eyes

on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing. 27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”? 28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. 29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Into the Scripture

Most scholars agree that the book of Isaiah is a fusion of three prophets’ oracles. They have come to be known as First, Second, and Third Isaiah. Chapters 34–35 and 40–55 are generally attributed to the anonymous prophet, Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah’s tone is predominantly optimistic. The deported community of Israelites in Babylon doubted its status as God’s chosen ones and even doubted the sovereignty of God. The purpose of Second Isaiah’s writings was to assure the exiles that God still

had compassion on them and remained in control. We begin our study with verse 21.

The poet used effective repetition to communicate with the distraught Israelites (verse 21). Today, we might say, “Don’t you get it?” He went on to illustrate ways that creation and history,

the worlds of nature and nations, join to reveal the sovereignty of God. The following are some helpful insights into the poet’s images found in verse 22:

- **“circle of the earth” (verse 22a).** The global form of the earth was unknown at the time. The earth and its oceans were conceived as a flat disc on which the dome of the heavens rested.



Life is a tug-of-war
between hurry and wait.

- **“... like grasshoppers” (verse 22b).** The image of grasshoppers is likely meant to contrast the minute size of humans with the greatness of the Creator who sits on the dome of the heavens.
- **“stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent” (verse 22c).** The picture of someone stretching out animal skins or goat’s hair cloth over and around poles to create a tent was familiar to the desert dwellers. The prophet pictured the Creator making a home for God’s people.

The Almighty also readily diminishes royals and rulers of the earth (verse 23). When people have political or legal power, it is easy for them to think of themselves as gods. But Isaiah pictured them as poorly planted stalks





of grain. All God needed to do was blow on them and they withered (verse 24).

God's own voice posed the question in verse 25, and the exiles knew the answer. But, having lived in exile for so long, they were tempted to forget God's promises—or, in their time of waiting, to wonder if they were true. Did Yahweh really exist? If so, why was the Holy One not doing anything to help them? Did God lack the power to do something—or the will—or both? Had Yahweh abandoned Israel? Were they going to be stuck in Babylon forever? Was there any hope?

Surely there was hope. Proof lay in the heavens. The forlorn people of God were urged to simply look up (verse 26). They had ample opportunities to observe the sun, moon, and stars. The stylistic question, "Who created these?" (verse 26a) once again reminded them of what they already knew. The Genesis narrative had long been an integral part of their belief system. The reality that God not only created the heavenly bodies but also named them further underscored God's sovereignty because, in ancient thought, names and existence were one.

The questioning continued in verse 27, further exposing the hearers' despondency and doubt. Jacob and Israel were, of course, two names for the same man—the man whose name the nation bore. The quotation "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God" may have been a community lament. The final passage of our study is constructed in the form of a psalm of praise (verses 28-31). The verses are familiar and, for the most part, self-explanatory. The descriptions of God which follow were intended to give comfort and prove to the exiled Israelites, who had despaired of Yahweh's very presence, that the Holy One had not abandoned them.

Isaiah used a pair of words—*faint* and *weary*—three times in the span of these few verses. While God never grows weary or faint, humans do. The Israelites certainly had. They weren't just weak in body; they were weak in spirit. How could they endure the hard circumstances of life any longer? Thanks be to God who gives power both to the weary and to the faint—then and now. All the waiting is worth it!

Into the Lesson

Imagine Second Isaiah expressing himself in today's vernacular (verse 28a): "Don't you people get it yet? Yahweh, our God, is everlasting! Besides that, the Almighty God is the creator of everything. So, what's your problem?" Israel's despondent attitude was pure folly. After their many years of exposure to the message of God's prophets, the exiled Israelites *should* have known and *should* have heard the message the prophet was reiterating. But just like us, they had to be reminded.

Maybe that is why waiting is so hard. When we forget who God is, the future is frightening. When we discard our faith, we lose our hope. When we no longer remember *who* we are and *whose* we are, we despair. We become like the tired, weary people who had trouble imagining that Yahweh would sustain them into the future. What can we do to remember that God has



While God never grows weary or faint,
humans do.

named us and claimed us? How can we learn to wait for the Holy One?

1. Have an attitude of gratitude while you wait.

Thanksgiving might be the last thing on our minds when we are waiting for God to act. We tend to be more like the Israelites who complained about their situation (verse 27b). They did not recall all the ways Yahweh had been with them through the years. How has God met your needs in the past? Express your gratitude as you wait.

2. Ask for patience while you wait. It has been jokingly said, “Do not pray for patience because God will give it to you.” The saying can be interpreted as meaning that if someone wants to grow in patience, they will experience difficult situations that force them to be more patient. But patience is a valuable fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22) that helps you keep from being frustrated or annoyed while you wait.

3. Seek God while you wait. Lamentations 3:25 declares, “The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.” Instead of turning inward with thoughts of “poor me!” or “why me?” and “how long must I wait?” turn to God. Put your wait time in God’s hands, remembering that while God’s timing is always perfect, it is rarely ours. “Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (2 Peter 3:8).

4. Praise God while you wait. When we praise God, we shut the door on negativity and complaining by affirming our trust in the Holy One. In addition, we release the focus on ourselves and redirect it heavenward. Practicing praise has a twofold benefit: we gain strength, encouragement, and courage when we offer our praise—and God gets the glory.

5. Serve others while you wait. Maybe you work in a service industry. Consider it a ministry! Maybe you spend your days at a desk in a cubicle, but you do not do it in isolation. When you interact with others, look for ways to bless them. Maybe you are retired and have ample time to volunteer your services. Be attentive to those with whom you serve and those whom you serve.



When we forget who
God is, the future is
frightening.

Hear their struggles, share yours (if it is appropriate), and note how much more quickly the time passes.

Admittedly, waiting feels like an inconvenience or affront. We take out our phones when we have two minutes to spare. We listen to podcasts during our commute. We absently leaf through magazines at the doctor’s office. Waiting reminds us that we are not in control and gifts us with a silence we do not know how to handle. Impatience with waiting is nothing new. Like the antsy Israelites, we do not wait well. But waiting has its benefits. Our study in Isaiah 40 concludes with a description of those benefits. Note the elements of restoration portrayed in verse 31:

But those who wait for the LORD *shall renew
their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

These familiar words stand in stark contrast to the way we have come to see the disenchanting exiles. We might describe them as weak, downtrodden, weary, and faint. Second Isaiah promised just the opposite. Our strength will be renewed. We can become spiritual “high-flyers”—energetic and resilient. So, can we agree that it is entirely possible that at least as important as the things we wait for is the work God wants to do in us while we wait? Waiting time is not wasted time for Christ followers.



Into Discipleship

John Piper is credited with this insight: “Waiting on the Lord is the opposite of running ahead of the Lord, and it’s the opposite of bailing out on the Lord. It’s staying at your appointed place while he says *stay*, or it’s going at his appointed pace while he says *go*. It’s not impetuous, and it’s not despairing.”¹ We have the choice, then, to take a deep breath, release our clenched fists, and trust God.

That is exactly what Second Isaiah encouraged the exiles in Babylon to do. Myriad other biblical personalities had to wait many years for God’s promises to come true. Consider Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and David, for example. But everything that happened in the meantime was used to prepare them, inwardly as well as outwardly. Then, when the promises became reality, they were blessed beyond measure. So how is God using your wait times to restore and renew you? The answer to that question is different for each individual because each situation is unique. However, there are several practices that can help us understand how God is working in us.

■ **Keeping a journal.** There is much to be said for the therapeutic benefits of journaling. Doctors and scientists alike agree that it can reduce stress and anxiety and improve one’s sense of well-being by helping us decode our thoughts and emotions. A Cambridge University study found that “participants who journaled about a traumatic event for fifteen to twenty minutes

over three to five days saw significant improvements in their psychological and physical health.” There is also evidence that journaling can improve cognitive function, focus, and memory capacity. By writing about disturbing thoughts and unpleasant experiences, one’s mind is free to let them go and focus instead on gaining a healthy understanding.²

If you are new to journaling, start small. Write for just a few minutes but be consistent. Then take time to reflect on your writing. Revisit previous entries to see where you were mentally and emotionally at the time. Note the ways you have progressed. Be assured that you will see God’s work in your life.

■ **Maintaining a gratitude list.** Maybe journaling does not appeal to you, but making a list does. Make a list of the things you are thankful for. Gratitude provokes a positive outlook and attitude. It inspires us to keep going and brings feelings of fullness and joy to our lives. It reminds us to open our eyes, minds, and hearts. We do, in fact, have things to be thankful for—even as we wait.

A gratitude list is exactly what it sounds like: a written list of things you are grateful for. It is not, however, a one-time assignment but, rather, an ongoing, everyday endeavor. You might start with the top ten things you are thankful for, but each day, the list should grow. Every day, you should add at least one more item to your list. Start with a blank notebook,

so that your gratitude list has plenty of room to grow. Then, as with journal entries, when you review your list periodically, you will see what God is doing in your life—as you wait.

■ **Practicing meditation.** Meditation is the simple, restful abiding in God’s presence. It involves slowing down, clearing one’s thoughts, focusing on something spiritual, and opening oneself to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying. There is not a prescribed way to practice this discipline. One ancient method simply uses a passage of Scripture as a point of reference to ponder. Another method is known as “centering down” or engaging in contemplative prayer. By practicing

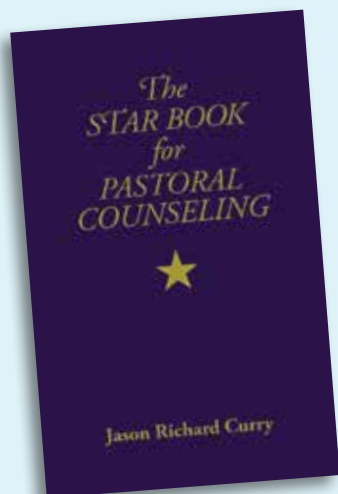
meditation, one surrenders to God the worries, difficulties, and challenges of life, and postures oneself to receive from the Almighty love, strength, and courage for the journey. That sounds a lot like what Isaiah said would happen when we wait on the Lord—does it not?

Notes

1. Jade Mazarin, “God Is Working in Your Waiting,” (*Desiring God*: February 20, 2017), <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-is-working-in-your-waiting>. Accessed March 15, 2023.
2. Dr. Gia Marson, “The Many Benefits of Journaling,” (Blog Post: June 22, 2021), <https://drgiamarson.com/the-many-benefits-of-journaling/#:~:text=Studies%20have%20shown%20that%20the%20benefits%20of%20journaling,common%20menopausal%20symptoms%207%20Improve%20symptoms%20of%20anxiety>. Accessed March 16, 2023.



Gratitude provokes a positive outlook and attitude. It inspires us to keep going and brings feelings of fullness and joy to our lives.



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Closing Prayer

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life, we come to you to have our strength renewed. We trust you alone to give us the stamina to walk the hard, narrow, winding path. Work in our lives as we wait on you, we pray. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- In times of distress and anxious waiting, what brings you comfort?
- If you were a weary exile, which verses in today's text would you find most comforting? Why?

■ Into the Lesson

- Under what circumstances are you most likely to forget that God is in control?
- For what are you currently waiting? How are you dealing with the wait time?

■ Into Discipleship

- If you regularly practice any of the three disciplines recommended in "Into Discipleship," in what ways has it helped you?
- If you do not already practice any of the three disciplines recommended in "Into Discipleship," which one are you most likely to explore?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- "Teach Me, Lord, to Wait" by Stuart Hamblen, © 1953 is based on Isaiah 40:31 (sung by Reggie and Ladye Love Smith and Wesley Pritchard); there are numerous versions of this song on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/aCNoFkzhT9o?feature=shared>
- "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" by Isaac Watts, © 1719 (sung by Grace Community Church): https://youtu.be/yKP_XxCBZDY?feature=shared
- "Lead Me, Guide Me" by Doris Akers, © 1953 (sung by Velma Willis): <https://youtu.be/PLpB-dE2DHM?feature=shared>
- "Resurrender" (words and music by Brooke Ligertwood and Chris Davenport, © 2021, Hillsong Music Publishing—a contemporary worship song that focuses on the theme of restoration): <https://youtu.be/Lmty4UICy4?feature=shared>



Media Option

What Did Jesus Say? A Daily Devotional Journal

by William S. Epps (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2004). Each daily entry in this book begins with a quote from Jesus, reminding the reader of the power and truth Christ spoke. Epps then provides rich commentary on each passage. A final question urges readers to interact with the Scripture for the day. These daily reflections and questions are intended to inspire readers to think and reflect on their life journey. Readers are also encouraged to record their thoughts in the journal space provided as they apply Jesus' words to their lives 365 days a year. <https://www.judsonpress.com/Products/0509/what-did-jesus-say.aspx>

Baptist Connection

Share the story of Yosh Nakagawa wherein he wrote of forced exile within the United States. *My American Story* is available for download at <https://abhms.org/about-us/mission-stories/my-american-story/>.

Activity Ideas

- **Introduce** the idea of waiting and **invite** participants to share a few details about a long wait they recently experienced.
- If someone in the class or congregation is knowledgeable in the fields of journaling, maintaining a gratitude list, or meditation, **arrange** for that person to speak to the class. The presentation could be instructional or philosophical.

- **Discover** whether there are any exiles from Ukraine, Afghanistan, or another country living in your community. Invite them to be a part of your class experience.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany Week of February 4, 2024

Sunday, February 4

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c;
1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Monday, February 5

Psalm 102:12-28; 2 Kings 4:8-17, 32-37; Acts 14:1-7

Tuesday, February 6

Psalm 102:12-28; 2 Kings 8:1-6; Acts 15:36-41

Wednesday, February 7

Psalm 102:12-28; Job 6:1-13; Mark 3:7-12

Thursday, February 8

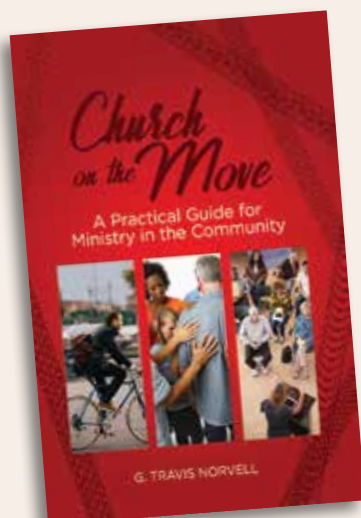
Psalm 50:1-6; 1 Kings 11:26-40; 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Friday, February 9

Psalm 50:1-6; 1 Kings 14:1-18; 1 Timothy 1:12-20

Saturday, February 10

Psalm 50:1-6; 1 Kings 16:1-7; Luke 19:41-44



Church on the Move: A Practical Guide for Ministry in the Community

by G. Travis Norvell

“*Church on the Move* is focused on the doable ways a church can organically grow in its mission, and even in numbers, by connecting in real ways to the surrounding community. It is practical, accessible, and uplifting, and it stirs the imagination.”

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UNDERSTANDING

gaining strength for the journey

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

—MARK 9:7b

Introduction

It was not good news that Jesus proclaimed in his first passion prediction (see Mark 8:31–9:1). Indeed, it was bad news for the disciples who were incapable of understanding what Jesus was trying to tell them. “Undergo great suffering,” really? “Be rejected by the religious leaders?” How could their beloved Teacher be subjected to such demeaning treatment? “Imminent death?” Their Messiah was destined to rule! What was Jesus talking about, they wondered? Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain to give them an opportunity to gain strength for their journey in the valley.

Occasionally, we receive news that hits us like a lightning bolt. One ministry leader said the bad news was like a bomb going off for her family. There was shrapnel everywhere! But thankfully, even amid trauma, God gives courage and strength.

Lesson Objectives

- To review details surrounding Jesus’ transfiguration.
- To broaden the concept of mountaintop experiences.
- To encourage individuals to seek out opportunities to glimpse the Divine.

Mark 9:2-9 NRSV

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one

with them any more, but only Jesus. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Into the Scripture

(There are three accounts of the Transfiguration: Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-9; and Luke 9:28-36. Take some time to read all three accounts before proceeding. The purpose of reading the parallel accounts is not to find seeming discrepancies but to try to envision a more complete picture of what happened on that mountaintop.)

The Transfiguration is shrouded both in mystery and glory. The location of the “high mountain” remains unknown. Tradition suggests that the glorious event took place on Mt. Tabor in southern Galilee. Mt. Tabor, however, is only about one thousand feet high. In Jesus’ day, there was a fortress at the top, so it would not have allowed for privacy or solitude. Not until later in the chapter (9:30) do we learn that Jesus traveled south through Galilee to Capernaum; so, it seems certain that

he was not in the vicinity of Mt. Tabor at the time of the Transfiguration.

In contrast, many scholars suspect that at 9,200 feet, Mt. Hermon was the actual site. This majestic mountain is located nearer to Caesarea Philippi—where Jesus was just prior to his transfiguration (8:27)—and was considered the most noteworthy mountain in the immediate area. (See map

showing both mountains and cities: https://bibleatlas.org/full/mount_hermon.htm.)

Whatever happened up on that mountain is also something of a mystery. But there were three witnesses to the Transfiguration, just as there are three biblical accounts. As he did on other occasions recounted by Mark (see 5:37; 13:3), Jesus took his inner circle with him up the mountain—Peter, James, and John.

“

Jesus took his inner circle with him up the mountain—Peter, James, and John.

“And he was transfigured before them” (verse 2b). The Greek word for “transfiguration,” *metamórfosi*, is the root of the English word *metamorphosis*. Therefore, we can assume that there was a striking alteration in Jesus’ physical appearance. Mark reported that “his clothes became dazzling white” (verse 3). White clothing symbolized purity and even divine status.

Then Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus (verse 4a). Those two patriarchs represented “the law and the prophets”—the two principal components of the Old Testament. So, the greatest of the lawgivers and the greatest of the prophets came on the scene presumably to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and myriad messianic prophecies.

Peter was duly impressed! He knew he and his cohorts were witnessing something supernatural. Wanting to prolong the remarkable experience, he suggested putting up shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (verse 5). This was likely a reference to the booths that were used to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles when the Israelites lived in booths for seven days (see Leviticus 23:39-43).





Peter was not just impressed; he was terrified as well, as were James and John (verse 6). Fear was natural. A physical metamorphosis of their beloved Master paired with the appearance of two historic saints sent by God from heaven was indeed mystical. They had never experienced anything like it. And it was over before they were ready. A cloud overshadowed them, and God said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (verse 7b). This was the same voice as the one that spoke at Jesus’ baptism (see Mark 1:11; Matthew 3:17; Luke 3:21-22). God had chosen Jesus to do the work of redemption. On the mountain, God confirmed that divine choice. The disciples were to understand that Jesus was doing the task for which he had been chosen—indeed, the task he had outlined to his disciples when he predicted his death and resurrection.

Then it was over. The cloud lifted. Moses and Elijah disappeared. The disciples saw only Jesus with them (verse 8). It is likely that he had returned to his natural (not glorified) physical state. To top it off, the lips of the three disciples were sealed (verse 9). They were not to talk about what they had seen and heard. Perhaps the reason Jesus told them not to tell anyone was the same reason he himself avoided the title “Messiah,” a term rife with political overtones. The time to tell all, however, was fast approaching.

Into the Lesson

Whatever the exact nature of the event we call the Transfiguration, it was a didactic gift to the three disciples who witnessed it. Jesus gave them a sneak preview of the indescribable glory that lay ahead. William Barclay explained it this way: “They had been shattered by Jesus’ statement

that He was going to Jerusalem to die. That seemed to them the complete negation and denial of all that they understood of the Messiah. They were still bewildered and puzzled and uncomprehending. Things were happening which not only baffled their minds but which were also breaking their hearts. What they saw on the Mount of Transfiguration would give them something to hold on to, even when they could not understand.”¹ Jesus’ transfiguration provided them with a precious memory to which they would cling. (See Peter’s recollection in 2 Peter 1:16-18 and John’s in John 1:14.)

What lesson(s) might we gain from our study of the Transfiguration? Consider this interpretation offered by a contributor to *The Interpreter’s Bible*: “The revelation on the mountaintop says to us, ‘Trust your high hours. Keep your times of clear vision as the stay of your mind, the point of reference for all the days to come.’ The weather of the mind and spirit is varied. It runs from sunlight through dense fog to pitch darkness. Yet spiritual truth has its hours and days of high visibility, when it is transfigured before us. Then we can affirm, ‘This is everlastingly right.’”²

We can equate this writer’s “high hours” with the more familiar term “mountaintop experiences.” Throughout the ages, people have associated mountains with heightened spirituality. In the Bible, mountains were often



Jesus gave them a sneak preview of the
indescribable glory that lay ahead.

the places where God encountered humanity, changed lives, and sent them back down to the valley with something to talk about. (Moses experienced this type of encounter; see Exodus 19.) Although it has become somewhat of a cliché, the mountaintop experience is something we as Christians seek. It is on the “mountaintop” that spiritual revelation takes place, and we experience the tangible presence of God. When that happens, we are inspired and motivated to serve God more faithfully.

While we thrive on those mountaintop experiences, God never intended for us to live up there. We return to the valley to ponder and implement what we learned. In other words, we try to keep our times of clear vision as points of reference for daily living.

The valley out of which Peter, James, and John ascended seemed very dark. They were confused and dejected, reeling under the news of the Cross. But not all of life’s valleys are dismal and depressing. There are valleys where refreshing streams flow and trees and flowers flourish. Valleys can be places of peace and rest, too. Yes, we may move from the sunlight into dense fog and even into complete darkness in our personal valley, but we depend on God to move with us and on the Holy Spirit to prompt us to recall and rely on what we saw during the times of clear spiritual visibility.

Perhaps we can learn to think of the proverbial mountaintops as liminal spaces, or what the Celtic community calls “thin spaces.” *Liminal space* is a place in-between what was and what will be. That definition certainly describes where Peter, James, and John were in our text. Perhaps you have faced a difficult trial that brought you to the edge of your faith. Or you participated in a retreat and found that you had come to the edge of your understanding of spiritual realities. Both are liminal spaces because you came to the end of what you depended on to give continuity and meaning to your life. At the same time, you found yourself on the threshold of an opportunity to grow. Somehow you were graced to encounter the Divine in new ways.

A liminal space can be anywhere. Location is not an issue.

- Maybe it is a familiar quiet place where you just pause, breathe, and be.
- Or maybe it is a new, thought-provoking space where you are inspired to ask questions and wrestle with possible answers.

- It could be a challenging space—like a mountaintop—where you are inspired to reexamine your faith, grapple with your doubts, and confront your fears.
- A liminal space might be an exhilarating space where you explore hopes and reimagine dreams.
- It may also be a tense space as you live with the discomfort of uncertainty and confusion.
- It can be a safe space that provides an opportunity for you to partner with God as you seek to become your best self.

If we can embrace the tension of the liminal experience and allow God’s Spirit to show us what our next steps might be, this space—our very own thin space—will be a place where we gain strength for the journey. We should linger in this space for as long as we can and make the most of every grace-filled moment.

Into Discipleship

Do you yearn for your very own thin space? A memorable mountaintop experience? A liminal encounter with the Divine? A unique connection to the Sacred? If your answer is “yes,” then you have an open heart. And according to noted author and speaker Marcus Borg, open hearts and thin spaces encompass much of what is central to being Christian.³

So, how do you find the time and space when everything around you is calling for your attention? It is helpful to keep in mind that the veil between heaven and earth can become transparent *anywhere*. God’s peace and presence can become tangible *anywhere*. Remember what Jacob said when he woke up from his dream about the ladder that reached into heaven? “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:16). Just like the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jacob was fearful; he exclaimed, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17).

Thus, thin places produce mindful, calm, unfettered, agenda-free moments where we catch a glimpse of the Divine. It would be nice if we could just drop our responsibilities and make a pilgrimage to a revered site. Or take a few days to travel to a place where our senses would be flooded with a sense of heavenly awe. What would you choose? A beach? A cozy cabin by a lake? A mountain view? Perhaps a historic house of worship? But



keep in mind that we do not need a postcard setting to realize the presence of God. (Nevertheless, if you can get away, by all means, go!)

We can enter thin places in our everyday venue.

- Some people find liminality in their commute time. While it is a literal “time between,” it can metamorphose into a time when one is keenly aware of God’s presence.
- For some, a daily exercise routine offers a thin place. Whether we are on a treadmill, lifting weights, jogging, or taking an early morning walk, we can keep the eyes of our heart open to see the Holy One.
- Quotidian tasks lend themselves to spiritual experiences. We can be folding laundry, doing the dishes, cleaning the garage, or removing snow while keeping our focus on God’s glory and presence.
- A favorite chair or other resting spot can become a thin place. When we have the occasion to just “be,” God can use that sacred pause to help us “become” more like Christ.

Find, create, and cultivate your own thin place. Spend consistent time there. Take note of the transforming work God is doing in your life. Express your gratitude, and when the time is right, tell someone.

Judson Press author and nationally known worship leader Brad Berglund and his wife, Rita—a psychotherapist and professor—are devoted to the spiritual

deepening of individuals and churches. Melding their talents as spiritual directors and retreat leaders, they invite seekers to join them on spiritual pilgrimages they call Illuminated Journeys.

Traditionally, pilgrimage has been defined as a journey to a sacred site. Brad and Rita take it a step further by heartily concurring with Sister Macrina Wiederkehr’s definition: “A pilgrimage is a ritual journey with a hal- lowed purpose. Every step along the way has meaning. The pilgrim knows that life giving challenges will emerge. A pilgrimage is not a vacation; it is a transformational journey during which significant change takes place. New insights are given. Deeper understanding is attained. New and old places in the heart are visited. Blessings are received and healing takes place. On return from the pilgrimage, life is seen with different eyes. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.”⁴ Does that sound appealing to you? Find out more about Brad and Rita’s approach to pilgrimages by visiting their website: <https://illuminatedjourneys.com/>.

Notes

1. William Barclay, “The Glory of the Mountaintop,” Bible Portal, <https://bibleportal.com/commentary/section/william-barclay/the-glory-of-the-mountain-top-mark-92-8>. Accessed April 14, 2023.
2. George Arthur Buttrick, ed. *The Interpreter’s Bible: Volume VII*, “9:2. And He Was Transfigured Before Them,” (New York: Abingdon Press, 1951), 774-775.
3. “Open Hearts and Thin Spaces,” The Marcus J. Borg Foundation, January 27, 2013, Featured Videos, <https://marcusjborg.org/videos/open-hearts-and-thin-places/>. Accessed April 14, 2023.
4. Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB, *Behold Your Life: A Pilgrimage Through Your Memories* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2000), 11.

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, thank you for the mountaintop experiences you make available to us. As we journey through the valley with all its challenges, remind us to meditate on and digest the truths you have revealed to us. We commit to being more effective ambassadors for your kingdom. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- How do you picture the scene of Jesus' transfiguration?
- With which of the characters in the story of the Transfiguration do you most closely identify? Why?

■ Into the Lesson

- When was your most recent mountaintop experience? Describe it.
- What do the words "This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (verse 7b) mean to you?

■ Into Discipleship

- What location might you compare to the Mount of Transfiguration in that you caught a glimpse of Divine glory in a special way?
- What step(s) do you intend to take to find, create, and cultivate your personal "thin place"?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- "God on the Mountain," composed by Tracy Dartt. This song was originally sung by George Beverly Shea, but popular contemporary gospel artist Lynda Randle is more recently associated with it. Here is one version: <https://youtu.be/RCTl4tUYIAg>
- "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," composed by Helen Howarth Lemmel, 1922. Public domain. This hymn may be found in many hymnals. This version is sung by John Starnes: https://youtu.be/iFJ0FqX_Uh8?si=sIkE3FilThgcK1F3
- "Open Our Eyes, Lord," composed by Robert Cull. © 1976, Maranatha Music. This short song/chorus works well as a prayer: <https://youtu.be/XDHaf1-cA0I?si=nTzyc6nj1EmclenQ>
- "Open the Eyes of My Heart," composed by Paul Baloche, © 1997, Integrity's Hosanna! Music. This song is also a prayer: <https://youtu.be/ViBNqNukgzE?si=8CvTE6Tw5OwLPldm>



Baptist Connection

Brad Berglund is the author of *Reinventing Sunday: Breakthrough Ideas for Transforming Worship* (Judson Press, 2001) and *Reinventing Worship: Prayers, Readings, Special Services, and More* (Judson Press, 2006). <https://www.judsonpress.com>

Activity Ideas

- **Consult** your church's collection of maps that show the location of Mt. Hermon to the north, Mt. Tabor to the south, and the towns of Caesarea Philippi and Capernaum. **Display** the map in the classroom. **Refer** to the map during the "Into the Scripture" segment. Or use the digital map: https://bibleatlas.org/full/mount_hermon.htm.
- **Search** the Internet for pictures of Mt. Hermon. **Print** a copy to pass around the group. There are many available online from which to choose.
- If you use the hymn "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," you may wish to **share** the backstory of the song. It is available at <https://enjoyingthejourney.org/hymn-history-turn-your-eyes-upon-jesus/>.
- **Form** dyads and **invite** participants to share the answers to the Reflection Questions for the "Into the Lesson" section.
- If anyone in your group or your church has been on a religious pilgrimage, **invite** them to make a brief presentation about their experience and ways it helped them gain strength for their journey.

- **Read** the other two accounts of the Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1-8 and Luke 9:28-36). **List** the additional details gained from this reading and **discuss** how they enhance one's understanding of the event.

Devotional Scriptures Year B Transfiguration Sunday Week of February 11, 2024

Sunday, February 11

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Monday, February 12

Psalm 110:1-4; Exodus 19:7-25; Hebrews 2:1-4

Tuesday, February 13

Psalm 110:1-4; Job 19:23-27; 1 Timothy 3:14-16

Wednesday, February 14 (*Ash Wednesday*)

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Thursday, February 15

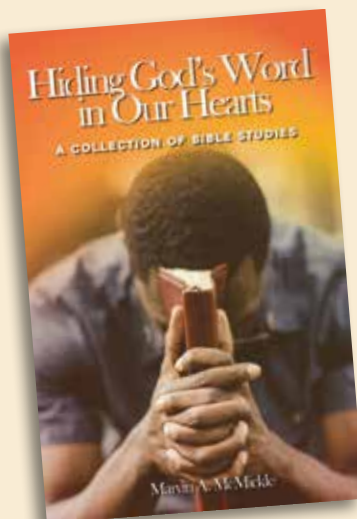
Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:1-14; 1 John 1:3-10

Friday, February 16

Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:15-25a; 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Saturday, February 17

Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 32; Matthew 9:2-13



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DELIVERANCE

praying in troubled times

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

—PSALM 25:1

Introduction

Toward what book do you gravitate when you sit down to read something in your Bible? Where do you go when you want to know more about God's grace and loving purpose for your life? What biblical book do you turn to when you are looking for consolation, support, or even perhaps deliverance in a difficult situation? Like many Christians, perhaps your answer to these questions is the book of Psalms. The psalmists not only seemed to express our own emotions of fear, joy, isolation, confusion, anger, and more, but they also teach us how we should respond to the situations that led to those sentiments in the first place. Psalm 25 is no exception. It is a guide for all of us who find ourselves in times of trouble.

Lesson Objectives

- To explore ways to identify with David and his struggles that inspired Psalm 25.
- To probe the ideas the psalmist set forth about God's character.
- To identify ways in which this psalm speaks to us today.

Psalm 25:1-10 NRSV

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. 2 O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. 3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. 4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. 5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. 6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! 8 Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. 9 He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. 10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Into the Scripture

Psalms were songs used in public worship.

Psalm 25 is an alphabetic acrostic poem. There are slight irregularities in the pattern, but, in general, each line begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, verse 1 begins with *aleph*, verse 2 with *bet*, and so forth. This literary device adds beauty and form to a poem. Some critics believe that the pattern gives the sense that the subject of the poem is being covered completely—from A to Z, as we might say today. The acrostic pattern may have also been used to make memorization and recitation easier, since the psalms were songs used in public worship. To view a version of Psalm 25 with the Hebrew alphabet introducing each verse, visit <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2025&version=LSB>.

The New Revised Standard Version titles Psalm 25 as a “Prayer for Guidance and for Deliverance” and labels it as a psalm of David’s. The precise time of David’s life portrayed here is unclear. He experienced troublesome times so often that any number of circumstances could have inspired him to write this psalm. Psalm 25 opens with an expressive figure of speech.



The Hebrew language portrays the lifting up of one’s soul (verse 1) as a permanent setting of one’s affections on the divine rather than merely a temporary raising of one’s heart to God. So even though cares and troubles were weigh-

ing David down, he intentionally lifted his soul to God in prayer and worship.

The positive approach expressed in verse 1 continues in verse 2. David’s pledge of trust in God (verse 2a) implies that he had confidence in the Almighty. It is worth noting that he paired his pledge with a more personal title for God that he used in the previous verse. Instead of addressing the Holy One as “O LORD” (verse 1), he stepped up the portrayal of his spiritual relationship by using the phrase “O my God” (verse 2). David articulated a faith that was strong and sound.

Then he began his petitions (verse 2b). He asked that he not experience shame because of having placed



Psalms were songs used in public worship.

his trust firmly in God. He had myriad enemies who were eager to revel in his demise. He was praying for deliverance from whatever mess in which he had found himself. If God did not come through for him, he would certainly be brought to shame. He prayed this not only for himself, but for all those who wait on God (verse 3a) and the reverse for those who do not (verse 3b).

David’s next petitions may indicate some state of confusion in his time of trouble. He asked God to show him the right way to proceed. There were many paths available to him, but he wanted enlightenment from on high, so he prayed, “Make me to know your ways . . . teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me” (verses 4-5a).

Verses 6 and 7 contain a dual plea to “remember” and “not remember.” Simply stated, David wanted God to remember God’s divine character (which is compassionate, loving, steadfast, faithful, and upright) and forget David’s human character (which was sinful). God’s trustworthiness formed the basis for David’s hope. He counted on God to be consistent. Even as God remembers divine mercy and love, God forgives and forgets prior sins. These lines of poetry are expressions of David’s humility and the recognition of God’s goodness.

The goodness of God remains the focus as we move into the final verses of this study. David had learned about God’s goodness through love, not logic. It would be logical for God to judge and destroy sinners, but instead, the Holy One seeks to teach sinners (verse 8). Not all sinners experience God’s grace and generosity, however. God only teaches those who are willing to humble themselves and accept what the Teacher wants

to reveal to them (verse 9). The affirmation in verse 10 reminds us that love and faithfulness will meet for those who follow God’s way (see Psalm 85:10).

Into the Lesson

“David is pictured in this Psalm as in a faithful miniature. His holy trust, his many conflicts, his great transgression, his bitter repentance, and his deep distresses are all here; so that we see the very heart of ‘the man after God’s own heart.’”¹ Drawing on his dramatic life experiences, David voiced this psalm in the first-person singular and addressed God in the second-person singular, making it intimate and intensely personal. What might we learn from the way the psalmist approached God?

Perhaps it is beneficial to examine the way(s) we picture God, which, in turn, influences the way(s) we address God. As we have seen, in the space of two poetic lines (verses 1 and 2a), David moved from using the more official title “O LORD” to “O my God.” “LORD” is the English rendering of the Divine Name or Tetragrammaton (the combination of four Hebrew letters that form the ancient Hebrew name of God): YHWH. It was considered too sacred to be pronounced—for it is the name of the Holy One who entered into the covenant with Abram (see Genesis 15). For David, God was not an impersonal national deity but, rather, his personal Redeemer who had protected and delivered him through numerous conflicts and battles.

Remembering that God is so much more than that which can be named, how might you change the way(s)



you address God? How could you personalize your conversations with God? When you are amid troubled times, do you think of God differently than when life is going smoothly? Why? Five threads weave their way through this portion of Psalm 25 that we are considering. They include the psalmist’s total surrender to God, variations on three petitions addressed to God, and the affirmation of God’s goodness.

The psalmist’s surrender to the Almighty is masterfully rendered in the opening line, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul” (verse 1a). This act of submission simultaneously demonstrates profound vulnerability and decisive strength on the part of the writer. The theme of surrender reappears in verse 2a: “in you I trust”—and again in verse 5b: “for you I wait all day long.” Contemplate this act of offering the deepest, truest part of yourself to God. Is it easier or harder to do in times of trouble? Are the opening lines of your prayers for deliverance seasoned with frantic pleas or the humble offering of yourself to the One who will rescue you?

The first petition, “do not let me be put to shame” (verse 2b), sets the tone for verses 2 and 3. David’s faith was strong and his surrender sincere. Nevertheless, the



It is beneficial to examine the way(s) we picture God, which, in turn, influences the way(s) we address God.

fact remained that his sin had given rise to occasions where people who hated him and his God might be able to triumph. He was confident enough to ask that his trust in the Almighty be rewarded. Furthermore, David wanted the same for others who placed their trust in God. In troubled times, are you more or less likely to think of others who might be in a similar situation?

The second petition, “make me to know your ways . . . teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me” (verses 4-5a), infers that the psalmist believed there were many paths from which to choose. Indeed, he had already traveled down some of them. But in his time of trouble, he knew he needed godly instruction and divine guidance. Consider the specifics of the path that led you into difficulty at some point in your life. Where did your directions originate?

In the third petition, the psalmist called on the Almighty to remember God’s innate character and forget David’s own character (verses 6-7). We can only assume that he was haunted by his sinful choices. But the good news is that our merciful God extends everlasting divine compassion and love and does not remember our former sins. What details of your life’s journey are you most grateful that God has forgotten?

The affirmation of God’s goodness (verses 8-10) wrapped all the petitions into a bundle of praise. Because God is trustworthy, David knew that the path forward would be better than the one he had formerly traveled. God delivered David. However, deliverance required humility on his part, just as it is required of us. When you are going through troubling times, what is your usual mindset?

If David, a man after God’s own heart (see Acts 13:22), cried out for divine wisdom in difficult times, how much more do we need to do the same! David’s prayer can be every believer’s prayer. Our Deliverer wants to show us the way forward. So, like David, let us lift our souls in submission, humbly ask for divine guidance, and faithfully declare God’s goodness.

Into Discipleship

- **Pray the prayer:** To pray Psalm 25, start by reading it slowly and thoughtfully. Then meditate on the words that seem to “jump off the page” for you. Ask God to help you understand their meaning. Then rephrase the psalm and make it your personal prayer.

- **Study the Bible—your guidebook.** Since you are reading this lesson and taking advantage of Judson Press’s adult curriculum resource, *Journeys*, you give evidence that you are a faithful disciple who is committed to following God’s way. Whether you are a group leader, Sunday church school class teacher, class/group participant, or an individual subscriber, *Journeys* will assist in your quest to expand your biblical understanding, aid in your spiritual formation, and empower you for service as a faithful disciple.

- **Meditate on God’s Word.** Likewise, *The Secret Place*, a quarterly magazine also published by Judson Press, renews your faith, invigorates your spirit, and strengthens your relationship with God. Each daily devotion includes a Scripture passage, an original meditation, and a brief prayer. Written by Christian writers from across the nation and other parts of the world, these meditations share comfort and inspiration found in life’s everyday details. This combination of scriptural and personal insight provides both a timeless and timely perspective for contemplative meditation that draws you closer to God in your daily walk as a Christian.



Let us lift our souls in submission, humbly ask for divine guidance, and faithfully declare God’s goodness.



■ **Ask for help or become a helper.** Has your church joined the ranks of thousands of congregations with a Stephen Ministry? Stephen Ministries is a not-for-profit Christian education organization founded in 1975 that produces training and resources to equip members of the congregation to provide one-to-one Christian care to people who are hurting. These resources cover topics such as caring ministry, assertive relating, spiritual gifts discovery, grief support, spiritual growth, and more. So, if you are in the middle of a troubled time, a Stephen Minister (or your

pastoral care professional in your church) can offer emotional and spiritual help. Similarly, if you have a desire to help people who are going through crises, consider becoming a Stephen Minister. For more information and to read inspiring personal stories, visit <https://www.stephenministries.org/default.cfm>.

Note

1. Charles H. Spurgeon, "Psalm 25," *The Treasury of David* (The Spurgeon Archive, <http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/treasury/ps025.htm>). Accessed April 29, 2023.

Rest in the Storm, 20th Anniversary Edition: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers

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Closing Prayer

God of the narrow and upward path, we long to know your ways. Open our eyes to your truth as we study your Word. Help us walk daily in the path that you set before us. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- What situations are most likely to cause you to feel helpless? How do you react in those situations?
- Picture yourself doing what David did in verse 1. What do you see?

■ Into the Lesson

- How do you usually address God in your prayers? What does your chosen name for God reveal about the Holy One? About you?
- What about God's character gives you the most hope in times of trouble?

■ Into Discipleship

- What have you learned about God from Psalm 25?
- What has this psalm revealed to you about yourself?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Unto Thee, O Lord” by Charles F. Monroe (echoes the text of Psalm 25). Maranatha! Music and Charles Monroe hold the 1971, 1973 copyright. This song appears in several hymnals: https://youtu.be/tjqlkWhz-aA?si=t7M7__IpB-81_E1N
- “Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord” by Benjamin Mansell Ramsey is a traditional hymn in the public domain; it is published in many hymnals (this version performed by Sarah Baute): https://youtu.be/_voVCEZo3w?si=NpRawYPqtX-wFFyS
- “Goodness of God” by Ed Cash, Ben Fielding, Jason Ingram, Brian Johnson, and Jenn Johnson (performed by CeCe Winans) is a contemporary worship song that expresses the themes included in Psalm 25. Bethel Music Publishing holds the 2018 copyright: <https://youtu.be/9sE5kEnitqE?si=sy94EM15hCTGwGJI>
- “Graves into Gardens” by Christopher Joel Brown, Steven Furtick, Brandon Lake, and Tiffany Hammer is a contemporary worship song that speaks to the way God delivers and heals us in troubled times. Bethel Music Publishing holds the copyright: https://youtu.be/gF-2CQjC7PM?si=9rbUDf2Md_BQOJmS

Media Options

The following devotional focusing on Psalm 5:4-5 will appear in the upcoming Spring edition of *The Secret Place*. To learn more and subscribe, visit <https://www.judsonpress.com/Products/CategoryCenter/JPSEC/The-Secret-Place.aspx>.



Psalm 25:4-5

Is It Funny Money, Or Is It Real?

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. (*Psalm 25:5*)

When my daughters were young, we were in a store, and they found something they wanted. Usually, if it was okay, I would just buy it. But this was not something that I wanted them to have, so I told them that I was not going to pay for it. They replied that they would buy it themselves then, because they had their own money. I thought it odd that they would have cash with them, so I asked them to show me what they had. They pulled out some board game money and proudly showed it to me. I had to explain that their money was not real and would not buy anything except space on a game board.

How did I know that their money was fake? I had never seen it before. I knew that it was fake because I know what real money looks like, and that was not it.

This is a lot like sin. Sin comes in a nearly infinite variety of forms. We cannot possibly know every variation in order to recognize it. Rather, all that we need to know is the truth that is in the Bible. Anything that is different from this truth is wrong. Biblical knowledge is our first and best defense against sin and temptation.

PRAYER: Omnipotent God, may my heart search for and embrace your truth. Amen.

Bob LaForge – Freehold, New Jersey

Baptist Connections

- Two Judson Press connections are included in the “Into Discipleship” section.
- **Volunteer Mobilization Ministries:** In addition to praying, American Baptists have traditionally been people of action, giving freely of their valuable time and talents to help survivors of tragedy throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. Volunteer Mobilization Ministries facilitates individual volunteer missionary appointments, summer service opportunities, group mission experiences, specialized service projects, and disaster response. Discipleship calls for action! You can be a part of this ministry to help

others during troubled times. Contact Lisa.Harris-Lee@abhms.org or visit <https://abhms.org/ministries/healing-communities/volunteer-ministries/>.

Activity Ideas

- **Explore** the many Hebrew names for God and their meanings. This activity will help participants personalize the way(s) they address God, as suggested in “Into the Lesson.” There are many websites that provide this information. David Jeremiah’s online resource, “The Names of God and Why They Matter,” is one place to start: <https://www.davidjeremiah.org/knowgod/the-names-of-god>.
- **Have available** paper and pencils/pens. **Invite** participants to write a personal version of David’s prayer (Psalm 25:1-10).
- **View** Jason Silver’s musical version of Psalm 25:1-10. This music video is composed of Silver’s vocals, printed lyrics, and scenery. You will find it on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/x9IUCHKYIG0>.
- **Read** Psalm 25:1-10 in several versions. **Note** additional insights received from the readings.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B First Sunday in Lent

Week of February 18, 2024

Sunday, February 18

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Monday, February 19

Psalm 77; Job 4:1-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

Tuesday, February 20

Psalm 77; Job 5:8-27; 1 Peter 3:8-18a

Wednesday, February 21

Psalm 77; Proverbs 30:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11

Thursday, February 22

Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18; Romans 3:21-31

Friday, February 23

Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:1-6; Romans 4:1-12

Saturday, February 24

Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:7-15; Mark 8:27-30

FAITH

growing strong in faith

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

—ROMANS 4:20-21

Introduction

Romans 12:3 tells us that God has assigned each of us a measure of faith. But we are expected to improve upon that measure. Are you striving to grow stronger in your faith? Then the key is to examine the object of your faith. It is intriguing to think that the amount of faith we have is inconsequential. Jesus said that even if we have a little bit of faith—perhaps even as tiny as a mustard seed—it will work (see Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6). The object of our faith is what is important. In this study, we will look through Paul’s eyes at the faith of Abraham. Genesis 15:6 establishes that Abraham believed God. As a result, Abraham was “fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (see “Key Verse”). Are you?

Lesson Objectives

- To better understand what praising God looks like and when to do it.
- To have a firm understanding of the difference between praise and thankfulness.
- To feel comfortable beginning or increasing our current praise and worship practice.

Romans 4:13-25 NRSV

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. 16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father

of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 23 Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Into the Scripture

Romans 4 illustrates the concept of faith through the life of Abraham, the patriarch of Israel. (To better understand this chapter, it will be helpful to review details of Abraham’s life as recorded in Genesis 15–25:11.) “Abraham is cited more frequently in Paul’s letters than any other historical figure except Jesus. By Paul’s day, Abraham was honored as the quintessential believer who had worshiped the one true God in the midst of idolatrous peoples. His stature had been embellished by legend,

miracles, and quasi-deification; and his grave in Hebron was regarded as a holy place.”¹

Paul’s purpose in offering Abraham as an example was to augment his position statement on salvation through faith: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works

prescribed by the law” (Romans 3:28). Why Abraham? First, he was justified by faith and not by works (see 4:1-8). Second, Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised (see verses 9-12). Third, God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled through faith and not through the Law (verses 13-25). Thus, Paul intended to portray

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God has assigned each of us a measure of faith.

Abraham not only as the father of Israel but also as the prototype of Christian faith. His choice was a bold one. His stance put him at odds with the rabbis of his day who maintained that Abraham was counted righteous and rewarded because of his observance of Torah.

Our focus in this lesson is on the third section of Romans 4. There are four things that Paul pointed out about Abraham’s faith:

1. What faith is not.
2. What faith does.
3. What faith is.
4. Whom faith helps.

In verses 13-15, Paul reiterated the premise that Abraham did not receive God’s gift of righteousness





because he was living up to some legal standard. It was not because he was trying to meet the requirements of the law. Had that been the case, Paul would have lifted up Abraham for his works and not for his faith. Faith is *not* works.

Verses 16-17a tell us what faith *does*. What works cannot do, faith does—it secures God’s promises. Furthermore, it introduces the concept of grace, which in turn guarantees God’s promises. If we had to earn our standing before God, we would certainly fail somewhere along the line. But it is all in God’s hands, and God will not fail.

Verses 17b-22 comprise the heart of this section of Scripture, and here we find what faith actually is. To unpack this, Paul offered three subpoints.

1. The quality of our faith depends on the object of our faith. Abraham believed in God (verse 17b).
2. Abraham believed that God brings life to the dead (verse 19). Abraham’s faith did not waver when he looked at his own physical being which Paul described as “already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.”
3. Abraham believed that God would do what the Holy One promised (verse 21). He believed that the Creator could and would call into being things that did not already exist.

In summary, the exemplary faith exhibited by Abraham was firmly anchored in God. Abraham knew his God could give life to the dead and call into existence things that do not exist. So, despite the seeming

impossibilities, he believed that God was able to make him “the father of many nations” (verse 18a). His faith—a faith firmly grounded in truth—enabled him to grasp God’s promise and, thereby, give glory to God (verse 20).

Verses 23-25 name Paul’s readers (and us) as the beneficiaries of this exemplary faith. Paul used Abraham’s experience as a model for the Gentiles in Rome to whom he was writing. The Epistle to the Romans is a commanding exposition of the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith. Everything Paul wrote found its culmination in Jesus. Therefore, the chapter ends with the good news that the righteousness accorded to Abraham is also bequeathed to everyone who believes God brings life out of death—that is, raised Jesus from the dead.

Into the Lesson

What is faith? Some people believe that faith is a feeling of confidence. If you have confidence, you have faith; if you do not have confidence, you have little or no faith. If this were the case, your faith would depend on how much feeling you could generate. Some see faith as a virtue—albeit an admirable virtue. “I just have faith,” they say, as though faith is neither felt nor experienced. It is simply possessed.

Others think that faith is nothing more than mental assent to a truth, that if you believe something is true,



The quality of our faith depends on the object
of our faith.

you are exercising faith. But faith is more than that. While belief is based on information, faith is based on application. As a result, belief does not necessarily translate into action, but faith does. That is the reason why the Apostle Paul used Abraham as his example in his exposition on faith in Romans 4. And that may also be the reason why Frederick Buechner wrote, “Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession.”²

It is hard for us to find a way to use the word “faith” as a verb, although Merriam-Webster cites archaic usages that include “faithing, faithed, faiths.” But there are plenty of verbs that help explain faith. We will look at some of them, and as we progress, you will think of more.

- **Anchor:** “Anchor” is a transitive verb, meaning it has a direct object. It means to secure firmly. We anchor a post in concrete. We anchor our faith in God.
- **Trust:** To “trust” is to rely on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something. A common example purports that since a chair is designed to support the person who sits on it, we demonstrate trust when we actually sit on the chair. Similarly, we demonstrate our faith in God by placing our lives in God’s hands.
- **Depend:** When we depend on someone or something, we place our trust, our confidence—yes, our faith—in that person or object. We move forward believing the person or object is dependable and trustworthy. We can depend on the fact that the Almighty does exactly as is promised.
- **Rely:** If we rely on something or someone, we are assured, usually based on past experience, that what we expect will come to pass. Just as we rely on a friend to keep a promise, we can rely on God to do the same.
- **Believe:** “Believe” is the word that encompasses Abraham’s faith: “He believed the LORD” (Genesis 15:6a). Merriam-Webster says to believe is to accept something or someone as true, genuine, or real. God is, always has been, and always will be—so we believe.

Without belaboring this word search any further, we can agree with Buechner and others that faith is best viewed as an action word. And the resulting



While belief is based on information, faith is based on application.

decisive action is “going!” Chuck Swindoll, noted pastor, educator, author, and radio preacher, uses the phrase “going . . . not knowing.” He writes, “That’s what this thing called the Christian life is all about, isn’t it? Going . . . yet not knowing. As followers of our Lord we believe He leads us in a certain direction . . . or in pursuit of a precise goal. That leading is unmistakably clear. Not necessarily logical or explainable, but clear. At least to *us*. So—out of sheer obedience—we go. We pack our bags, pull up stakes, bid our friends farewell, and strike out. We face a future as uncertain as our leading is sure. How strange . . . yet how typical!”³

That is exactly what Abraham did. Hebrews 11:8b tells us, “He set out, not knowing where he was going.” And that is the action we are also called to take as we seek to grow strong in faith. Swindoll tells of a Christian businessman who left a six-figure-a-year position to enter a new career for which he had no training or expertise. He found that he would possibly gross about a fifth of what he had previously earned in his other job. When asked why he was making the dramatic life change, the man replied confidently, “One word—God.”⁴ That is faith in action! The *object* of our faith is what is important.

If we model our faith after that of Abraham’s, we look at the facts. We see what seems to be impossible, and we face it head-on. Knowing our God gives life where there is no life and brings things into existence that do not already exist, we move forward. We go . . . not knowing, but we go!



Into Discipleship

Paul was a gifted teacher. He had been writing about faith earlier (see chapter 3). Since faith is an abstract idea, he knew his readers would need a little help getting on board with his way of thinking. William Barclay writes, “The wise teacher knows that every word must become flesh, every idea must become a person, that the only way in which an ordinary person can grasp an abstract idea is to see that idea in action, and to see it embodied in a person. So, Paul in effect says, ‘I have been talking about faith. If you want to see what faith is, look at Abraham.’ Paul moves on to Abraham in order to make his readers see the abstract idea of faith in concrete action, so that they will really grasp what he means by faith.”⁵

If Abraham’s life provides a pattern for a life of faith, how might we emulate it? Note the verbs in verses 18-22 that describe Abraham’s actions.

1. “He believed . . .” (verses 18a). What stressful situation are you facing? How are you handling it? Do you focus on the possibilities or enumerate the potential problems? Abraham’s narrative shows us that faith’s power rests not in itself but in the One in whom we place our faith. The outcome is in God’s hands. Do you believe God?

2. “He did not weaken in faith . . .” (verse 19a). How often do you second-guess yourself? You feel the Holy Spirit’s guidance as you make a big decision, and you place your situation in God’s hands. But then—you begin to wonder if you did the right thing. *Maybe I should have waited. Maybe I should have done more research. Maybe I should have (fill in the blank).*

3. “He grew strong in his faith . . . (verse 20b). As a man of faith, Abraham claimed God’s promises and moved forward despite the obstacles. He believed he could live in God’s place, that God would give him a son, and that God would even bring life out of the ashes when he was called to sacrifice Isaac. Our faith is based on the same foundation. Are you living by faith? Have you claimed God’s promises? Are you growing stronger in your faith?

The story is told of another man trekking through a desert. He was lost and dying of thirst. As he struggled along, he came to an abandoned hut. Inside was a hand water pump with all its connections seemingly intact. He eagerly began pumping, but there was no sign of water. He continued his effort until he was exhausted. When he searched the hut for any other source of water, he found a bottle of water in one corner. He was eager

to drink from it, but the piece of paper attached to it read, “Please use this water to start the pump. It works. After you have finished, do not forget to refill this bottle again.”

After reading the message on the paper, he wondered, *Will the pump work if I use this water? Can I trust the words on the paper? If they are false, then my last source of water will be wasted.* He paused momentarily, closed his eyes, and prayed. Then he poured the water from the bottle into the pump and began pumping. Soon, he heard a gurgling sound, and water began pouring out.

Relieved, he filled and refilled his bottle. Refreshed by the life-giving water, he refilled the bottle from the hut and replaced it. As he looked further around the hut,

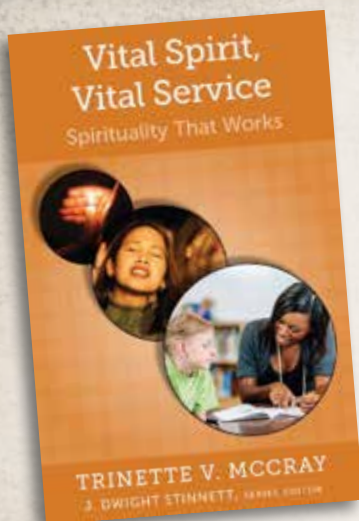
he discovered a pencil and a map showing directions to the nearby village. Pleased that his faith in the water pump worked, he believed that the map would direct him correctly. Then he wrote on the paper, “Have faith. It works.” Confidently, he left the hut.

Notes

1. Walter J. Harrelson, ed., “Excursus: Paul’s Use of Abraham,” *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2015.
2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), 25.
3. Charles R. Swindoll, “Going . . . Not Knowing, Part One,” *The Bible-Teaching Ministry of Pastor Chuck Swindoll*, September 4, 2017, <https://insight.org/resources/daily-devotional/individual/going---not-knowing-part-one>.
4. Ibid.
5. William Barclay, “The Faith Which Takes God at His Word,” *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 59-60.

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Abraham claimed God’s promises and moved forward despite the obstacles.



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Closing Prayer

God of us all, thank you for the example of Abraham. Give us courage to follow in his footsteps. Strengthen our faith in you and your never-failing promises. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture:

- How is our righteousness (i.e., our salvation) secured?
- For whose benefit did Paul write about the faith of Abraham (verses 23-24)?

■ Into the Lesson:

- Why is Abraham's faith a good example? What have you learned from his example?
- What two powers are attributed to God in verse 17? How do they impact your faith?

■ Into Discipleship:

- What verbs did Paul use to describe Abraham's faith in verses 19-21?

- What step(s) do you want to take as you move forward in your faith journey?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Morning by Morning,” written by Pat Barrett, Mack Brock, Daniel Bashta, and Ben Smith (release date February 26, 2021); this contemporary worship song echoes the thoughts that Abraham might have had when God promised the “impossible”: <https://youtu.be/7r0x4UMekkY?si=JIVxRkHk2ZfyX1qF>.
- “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place” by Eliza Edmunds Hewitt is a traditional hymn that has been published in many hymnals. It is in the public domain. Here, it is sung by Grace Community Church of Sun Valley, California: <https://youtu.be/Z5Jjf1awdfI?si=A51qBNZSVvwmWEgV>.
- “Day by Day”—words by Caroline V. Sandell-Berg (better known as Lina Sandell, “the Fanny Crosby of Sweden”) and music by Oscar Ahnfelt—is a traditional hymn found in many hymnals. <https://youtu.be/AzrhqjzQC4?si=pSkw5oSub67HCFYU>

Media Options

- To begin the session, view the video “Faith: A Short Film” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-QJYS-9Vg7c>. This video introduces the subject of faith in a lighthearted, entertaining manner.



- To close the session, view T.D. Jakes’s inspirational and motivational video “Walk in Faith, The Lord Will Provide” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl2wWHSLERE>.

Baptist Connections

- **Rodney Ragwan is an International Ministries’ Global Consultant for Theological Education.** He works with IM staff, global servants, and international partners to promote contextually relevant theological education around the world. Building on extensive experience as a Baptist leader in Africa, as a theology professor who has mentored students from around the world, and as IM’s Director of Mission Mobilization, Rodney facilitates and supports the development of training programs and resources with theological depth, cross-cultural sensitivity and heartfelt commitment to Jesus Christ. He wrote about stepping out in faith in his journal entry dated June 6, 2022: <https://www.internationalministries.org/stepping-out-in-faith/>.
- The ABHMS webpage touting “A people of great conviction and faith” features the twenty-minute video “**The Promise of Freedom.**” This is the story of how American Baptist leaders, driven by faith that incarnated God’s love through a deep passion for justice, founded and fostered several educational institutions in the wake of the Civil War. It is truly a narrative of God at work to call things into existence that never were (verse 17b). To read more and view the video, visit <https://abhms.org/about-us/mission-stories/people-great-conviction-faith/>.

Activity Idea

Discuss additional words (or short phrases) that describe faith as related to the list in “Into the Lesson.” You may wish to have a thesaurus available for this activity in case participants fail to make suggestions.

Devotional Scriptures Year B Second Sunday in Lent Week of February 25, 2024

Sunday, February 25

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38 or Mark 9:2-9

Monday, February 26

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Genesis 21:1-7; Hebrews 1:8-12

Tuesday, February 27

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Genesis 22:1-19; Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19

Wednesday, February 28

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Jeremiah 30:12-22; John 12:36-43

Thursday, February 29

Psalm 19; Exodus 19:1-9a; 1 Peter 2:4-10

Friday, March 1

Psalm 19; Exodus 19:9b-15; Acts 7:30-40

Saturday, March 2

Psalm 19; Exodus 19:16-25; Mark 9:2-8

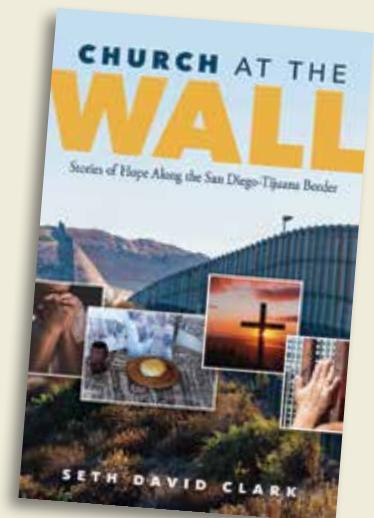
Church at the Wall: Stories of Hope along the San Diego-Tijuana Border

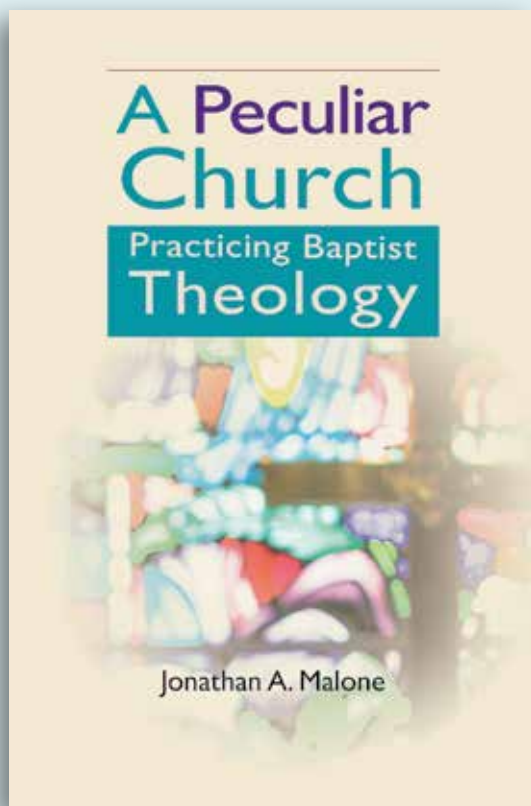
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